Blitz Kiva
illustration/ Kuwashima Rein

Paying to Win in a VRMMO

"Your coffee, Ichiro-sama."
"Mm, thanks."
Paying to Win in a VRMMO

NAME: ???
RACE: Human
CLASS: Fighter
EQUIP: XAN
Accel Coat
Point Armor: Elbows
Strider Boots
Weapon Carrier
Quick Pochette
NAME: Felicia
RACE: Human
CLASS: Beast Tamer/Thief/Scout
EQUIP: Domination Dagger
Healing Coat
Leather Boots
Feather Ribbon
Black Butterfly Hair Ornament
NAME: Ichiro Tsuwabuki
RACE: Dragonet
CLASS: Magi-Fencer
EQUIP: Yggdrasil Spiritwood Shirt
Panacea Bluebird Wing Necktie
Phoenix-Pegasus Wing Vest
Radiant Morpho Wing Jacket
Radiant Morpho Wing Slacks
Magi-Metal Dragon Scale Belt
Jewel Quartz Wristwatch
NAME: Kirschwasser
RACE: Human
CLASS: Knight/Fighter/Acolyte
EQUIP: Knight Sword
Kite Shield (Modified)
Heavy Metal Full Plate Mail
Chrome Metal Boots
Guardian's Amulet

"SHALL WE FINISH THIS?"
"OKAY. LET'S DO IT."
This battle would put an end to all of that. One of them would stop being "the strongest." Though if they did not challenge each other, if they did not fight, then both could remain the strongest...

0 - Prologue
1 - Noble Son, Begin
2 - Noble Son, Search
3 - Noble Son, Participate
4 - Noble Son, Descend
5 - Noble Son, Rampage
6 - Epilogue

0 - Prologue

Blasts of air, streaks of light, roars of sound. Shattering fire, dancing lightning. And wherever the two shockwaves collided, no objects would be permitted existence.

It was an extraordinary sight. It seemed unreal...

Of course, it wasn't real. That was a fact.

But would any of those standing there, watching those two avatars locked in joyous combat, really agree? The spectacle was nothing but an illusion, a mirage created by lines of code. Most people would admit to this readily enough. But, deep down in their hearts, would they really believe it?

The two greatest players on the Asgard Continent were colliding as everyone watched with bated breath.

A Human and a Dragonet.

A Fighter and a Magi-Fencer.

And... There was another, more decisive way to define the difference between them. But we needn't reveal that just yet.

The boy disarmed the Dragonet, sending his sword flying. But none of those present thought for a moment that this was the end of it. The man called up his menu window, selected "Config" with a well-practiced flick of the wrist, and immediately had an identical sword back in his hand. Its appearance was highly ornamental, but it was a greatsword with incredibly high combat stats. Each one cost 1,200 yen: a rather outrageous price for a tie-in item which had earned antipathy from many players.

"Pretty bourgeois..."

"Nonsense," the Dragonet replied to the boy's idle grumbling. "It is true that I have a bit more money than you, but do you have a problem with that?"

The boy shrugged and responded. "Nah, not really."

“I thought not.” His menu window still open, the man selected “Config” once more, leading him to the game’s microtransaction menu. Without hesitation, he tapped his credit card icon, selected the item he wanted, and selected the amount. Then he entered his PIN. There was a crash.

The sudden influx of new items caused countless consumables to overflow from the Dragonet’s inventory, crashing onto the ground.

In this game, the number of potions in circulation in NPC shops was limited per day, and the classes that could create them with alchemy were similarly limited. But this Dragonet man had simply ordered an overwhelming number of the “Basic Item Pack” microtransaction and, in an instant, summoned up more potions than a single avatar could use in a year.

“Hey, old man, ain’t you gonna use those potions? You shouldn’t waste ’em.”

“Nonsense. I decide what’s waste and what’s not. This mountain of potions is not wasted... Not if I use them to beat you.”

The tension that hung between the two of them had already reached critical levels, like a powder keg waiting for a spark. After more back-and-forth banter than anyone could count, would this match finally be settled?

No one watching knew for sure.

A Dragonet and a Human.

A Magi-Fencer and a Fighter.

And there was one other decisive difference between them.

Namely...

A whale and a hardcore gamer.

1 - Noble Son, Begin

Hayato Tsuwabuki's birthday party was held at the Hotel Grand Hills in early July. He would be 99 years old.

He had been the owner of the Tsuwabuki Zaibatsu, and had remained active as a mediator between the related companies after its disbandment after the war. Even now, he remained an influential person worldwide.

Nowadays he lived as a recluse, having bequeathed his fortune to his grandson, Meiro, but his ostentatious habits remained, and once a year he held a party like this.

The finest names in Japanese society were in attendance. Yet all eyes were fixed on just one man.

If you strained your ears, perhaps you could hear it...

On the 120th floor, high above the clamorous uproar of the lower world: a violin's melody. It was a swift, elegant tune, yet a cold passion ran beneath the surface.

Behind the unhurried movements of the bow, the player's expression was serene. Not a hair stood out of place in his neatly arranged platinum blond coif. He was a strikingly handsome man, the kind who turned heads wherever he passed. It was only natural, then, that many of the most eligible ladies in high society sent steamy glances his way.

At last the tune ended, and those who had been captivated by his performance — the vast majority of the guests — broke into wholehearted applause.

The man, seeming to give little heed to the applause, thanked them offhandedly and returned to the seat that had been reserved for him.

"What a versatile young man he is! The heir to the Tsuwabuki Concern..."

"His playing was invigorating. Truly splendid."

These glowing words were from men old enough to be his father.

“Ichiro. Wasn’t that Ernst’s ‘Grand Caprice on Der Erlkönig’?”

“I hear it’s one of the most difficult violin solos there is! You made it look so easy...”

These lavish compliments came from ladies of beauty and refinement.

But every one of them was a phrase Ichiro Tsuwabuki was well used to hearing, so he simply nodded along as he placed his violin in its case. He had brought the instrument along merely as entertainment for the party. He hadn’t even touched it for two or three years. Even something that earned him such lofty praise simply as a matter of course was nothing but an idle pastime for Ichiro, a man well aware of his personal brilliance.

It’s nonsense.

The words drifted into his mind of their own accord. The compliments to his playing skill did nothing to lift his spirits.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki was bored once again. He was numb.

A few seats away, his great-grandfather Hayato Tsuwabuki could be seen chatting gaily with a crowd of esteemed politicians. From time to time, they glanced over at him, perhaps using him as the object of discussion.

Starved for amusement, Ichiro looked around the room, only to find his gaze drawn by the sight of a girl. She was standing beside a table as stiff as a statue, dressed in a white dress that, while gorgeous, was clearly wearing her.

Though most would agree she was charming enough, she was nothing compared to the beautiful women all around her. That was the kind of girl she was.

“You’re quiet today, Asuha,” Ichiro said to her.

She opened her mouth to say something back, then bowed her head for a moment before looking back up at him and answering.

“Well... you know... I’ve just never been to one of these things before,” Asuha Tsuwabuki said in response. “I mean, I don’t live in a big house like yours, Itchy. My father’s just a regular office drone. Why would Great-grandpa invite me to a place like this? What was he thinking?”

“I doubt he was thinking anything in particular. Great-grandfather just likes you, that’s all.”

Ichiro caught sight of one of the waiters who was smoothly navigating the room, stopped him, and asked for a glass of orange juice. The waiter thanked him with a dignified and not even slightly sarcastic smile and glided off.

“Yeah, and I think you get your arrogance from him.”

Ichiro laughed. “Nonsense. I have nowhere near his stubbornness.”

“You’re the only one who thinks so,” Asuha sulked.

As she spoke, the waiter from earlier returned with a glass of orange juice on a tray, and, at Ichiro’s urging, set it in front of Asuha.

The glass was delicate, tall and thin like a champagne flute, and the sweet-sour citrus aroma that drifted up from it suggested only the finest.

Asuha picked up the glass with a sigh and stared hard at the liquid. She did not move to drink it.

“This is that stuff that’s 1,200 yen a glass, right?”

“I don’t know, but likely so.”

“It’s ridiculous. You could just give me the money, and I’d buy a whole case of Sarashibo Orange.” Despite her grumbling, Asuha’s anxiety appeared to be slowly washing away.

Of course, an objective look at the party guests would suggest she had a good reason to be suspicious of her great-grandfather’s invitation. His family tree was a vast one, yet his great-grandchildren, Ichiro and Asuha, were the only blood relatives he had invited.

Many of the guests were clearly hoping to see Ichiro’s father Meiro Tsuwabuki, president of the Tsuwabuki Concern, but he hadn’t come. As a result, Ichiro had been left to endure the brunt of the many high-society sycophants seeking an in with his father’s business. In other words, a lot of nonsense.

In the end, though, the deepest motive at play appeared to be nothing more than a desire to show off his accomplished great-grandson — Ichiro — and his lovely great-granddaughter — Asuha — to the outside world.

Despite appearances, Ichiro liked his great-grandfather, and had attended several such occasions. But all the same, he couldn’t claim he enjoyed them.

“Hey, Itchy. What have you been up to lately?” Asuha asked after finally gulping down her 1,200 yen orange juice.

“You mean in work, or in my private life?”

Asuha stared at him, exasperated. “I thought you didn’t help out with Uncle Meiro’s work that much.”

“I don’t help at all. Well, what I’m up to is much the same as ever. I’ve been spending a lot of time in Yamanashi lately.”

“*Another* weird bug?”

“That appellation is a matter of perspective. I think of them as beautiful insects, myself.”

As one might imply from Asuha’s use of “another,” bug-watching was

something of a hobby for Ichiro. He'd set out for Yamanashi on a quest to find the rare species of Japanese emperor, the national butterfly.

Ichiro could spend all night talking about the fabulous appeal of its unique spot pattern, but he refrained in this case. He did have some self-control, after all.

"If you keep this up, Itchy, no girl's ever gonna want to marry you."

Asuha's words caught the attention of the many beautiful girls around them. All of the eligible ladies at the highest levels of society were infatuated with Ichiro Tsuwabuki, young heir to the Tsuwabuki Concern. Many were wannabe Cinderellas who dreamed of marrying up into his beyond-rich-and-famous lifestyle.

But Ichiro's response...

"As the human race has already reached its apex in me, I have no interest in spreading my seed." That line was an immediate interest-killer, awakening the girls from their Cinderella dreams in a snap.

But his cousin Asuha, who had known him for a long time, was well accustomed to his unsettling outbursts, and responded without batting an eye.

"Itchy, are you interested in online games?" she began.

"No," he replied without a moment's hesitation.

She stared at him.

He gazed back at her.

"You just cut me off before I could talk!" she exclaimed, finally.

"Nonsense. You of all people know what my personality is like, Asuha."

"Y-You're so mean..."

"I may appear that way to some."

Asuha sighed, then started again. "Okay, um. Well, I've been playing a VRMMO lately."

"Oh?"

The unexpected word caught Ichiro's attention. A VRMMO, was it?

VR stood for “virtual reality,” technology for creating fully immersive fictional worlds. About ten years ago, some genius girl who had graduated from MIT had proposed “drive technology,” a form of VR that used particle waves that created sympathetic neural resonance to immerse the consciousness in a virtual space. Most talk of virtual reality nowadays referred to this.

MMO stood for “massively multiplayer online.” It was almost always followed by the word “RPG,” and, simply put, they were online games that were popular all over the world. When someone talked about playing games online, most of the time, they were talking about MMORPGs.

A VRMMO, then, was an MMO that ran on VR technology.

Asuha was still in middle school, as far as he knew. A girl of her tender age shouldn’t be spending a lot of time in online games, which fostered relationships in a virtual space and required significant investment to remain competitive in...

Or, at least, that was the conventional wisdom of the world, but Ichiro Tsuwabuki refused to be bound by such things. So he did not scowl excessively in response, but instead merely expressed mild surprise that the outgoing and athletic tomboy Asuha was devoting herself to playing a video game.

“That’s unusual.”

“Y-Yeah. The truth is, um, well...”

From the way she was stammering, he wondered if there must be more to the situation than she was letting on. Perhaps her inquiry about his interest was actually an invitation. Perhaps she was asking for his aid in some way.

“So, um. I was wondering if you might play with me, Itchy...”

“Hmm...” Ichiro stroked his chin and thought.

Relatively speaking, out of all his blood relatives, Asuha was the one he was closest to. He would feel bad about turning her down flat, but that alone wasn’t enough to motivate him. He would first do a thorough cost-reward analysis in his mind, and act based on that. Ichiro took it as a fundamental rule of life to only do things he really wanted to do.

What would it be like, he wondered.

He had certainly been lacking for amusements lately. A regular MMO he would dismiss out of hand, but the addition of those two little letters — that cutting-edge technology, “VR” — sparked an interest in him that he couldn’t deny.

“Is it interesting?”

“Umm...” Her lack of immediate confirmation indicated an honesty that he greatly appreciated. “It feels a little weird, really. It’s like a video game, but it’s also like you’re playing pretend. I guess because you’re really moving around.”

“I see.”

“But, but... I think you might really like it, Itchy. The graphics are really pretty.”

“If you insist, Asuha, perhaps I will try it.” Ichiro’s words caused Asuha’s expression to light up.

“Really?!”

“Really.”

If it would help to relieve his recent boredom, that alone would make it worthwhile. It wouldn’t carry much of a monetary investment, and if he truly enjoyed it, all the better. Even if the game itself didn’t tickle his fancy, depending on the nature of Asuha’s request, he might still be happy to help her out.

Just then, he recalled something. His live-in servant had recently made mention of a VRMMO she’d been addicted to. He wondered what the title was.

“So anyway, the game’s called *Narrow Fantasy Online.*”

Yes, that was the one. Then again, there were only two actual VRMMO games on the market right now. Among those in the financial world quietly monitoring the state of virtual reality technology, they were known as “the popular one” and “the unpopular one.”

He seemed to remember that *Narrow Fantasy Online* was “the popular one.”

“Sakurako-san plays that game, as well.”

“Oh, her? Yeah, I bet she would...”

Asuha had only met Ichiro’s live-in servant a handful of times, but she seemed to remember her well. Ichiro didn’t consider the servant’s personality terribly

eccentric, but she must have left a strong impression on a girl like Asuha.

For now, Ichiro's indication that he would try the game out seemed to inspire a relieved-looking smile in Asuha.

She didn't seem overjoyed, which lent weight to his theory that there was more to this than a simple desire to play a game together. What, then, could have gotten a girl of Asuha's age so deeply immersed in a VRMMO? He could speculate, of course. But without more solid proof, all he could do was wait for her to tell him.

"By the way, Itchy, do you even play video games?" she asked.

"A friend of mine in college liked games quite a lot. He lent me *Populous,* which I quite enjoyed."

"Oh, come on," she protested lightly.

Well, Ichiro's college days were ten years in the past. He hadn't played a computer game in a long time. He didn't exactly yearn for those days when he'd been lionized as a prodigy, but looking back now, perhaps there might have been a more age-appropriate way to enjoy them.

Although he had said he didn't play video games, he did enjoy feeling out his own playstyle within the strict limits of what was allowed by the program. Perhaps it would be stimulating.

"I'm so glad," she said. "The truth is, I came to the party to ask you that."

"You could have sent an e-mail or called."

"You can't ask someone a favor if you're not face to face." For a girl her age, Asuha was very conscientious about such things.

Well, one way or another, the girl in the white dress was now smiling. Ichiro nodded in approval. He asked her about how the game was played and other things, and made it through the rest of the party relatively free of boredom.

"By the way, would you like another juice?" he added.

"No, thanks. If I keep drinking this stuff, I'm going to go crazy thinking about how much it costs."

Heir to the Tsuwabuki Concern, Ichiro Tsuwabuki. In the highest echelons of society, there was no one who didn't know his name. He never helped with his parents' work and spent his free time searching for unusual insects. But he was more than a dilettante living off his parents' dollar. He paid for his house, his living fees, and his maid's salary, all with the money he earned himself. He hadn't received an allowance from his parents since New Year's when he was ten years old.

After all, he was the noble prodigy, Ichiro Tsuwabuki. He had graduated from Harvard University at the age of nine, and the influence his thesis had had on the economic world would be too much to state in these brief pages. The new theory sent a shockwave through business managers worldwide, and was still being cited in places as a work of enormous authority.

Ichiro had spent his earliest years in Vienna learning the violin and piano, and he played both at a professional level. Any music event held exclusively for the upper crust could be expected to have him in attendance. The pictures he painted to amuse himself were considered cutting edge works of modern art, and they sold for high prices. Just for fun, he'd traveled around the world, and had discovered over 20 kinds of new insects in the process.

All in all, Ichiro remained quite busily employed.

When he had spare time, he would sometimes visit universities as a guest lecturer, and he sometimes served as a paid consultant on asset management as an expert in the field of economics. He had spent two brief years thrilling living rooms as an idol singer, and through skilled investments, he had doubled the money he'd earned there many times over. Even as the rest of the world suffered under the economic downturn, he had more money than he could spend.

It was his money; he had made it himself. No one had the right to tell him how to use it.

Now, in Setagaya Ward's Sangenjaya, there was a luxury apartment complex with rents far out of the reach of the average citizen: Tsuwabuki Pavilion Sangenjaya.

The landlord was Ichiro Tsuwabuki. The architect was Ichiro Tsuwabuki. The entire top floor was his personal living space. The rent he took in from tenants

was chicken feed, but it was enough to cover maintenance costs and employee salaries with change left over.

It was after breakfast. Ichiro sat on the high-priced Armonia sofa in his living room, enjoying an elegant downtime. The news played on an LCD screen large enough to prompt thoughts of “bigger isn’t always better, you know” from the average observer. A newspaper and a tablet and other reading material sat close at hand.

At just this moment, Ichiro was on the phone, making small talk with the president of a general trading company.

“I see you’re just as wicked as ever,” Ichiro said with a smile, spreading his newspaper out on the table.

“My father thinks so, too. He says you really need to be more above-board about these things. Of course, I personally don’t object...”

The young man’s flippant tone would make it hard to believe he was addressing the president of Tsunobeni Co., one of the world’s financial leaders. Ichiro often advised him, and he secretly admired the man’s skilled way around the stock market. There was nearly a 40-year distance between them, but their mutual respect had fostered a relationship almost like friendship. Of course, if you probed deeper, their interactions were mostly businesslike, concerned with the coming and going of money.

“Oh, your daughter? Back in the country, you say? She was in Paris, wasn’t she? With her new fashion line. Oh, is it going well? That’s very nice. She showed me her designs before, but... Hmm? Oh, no, that’s nonsense, of course.”

As Ichiro carried on his conversation, his servant came out of the dining room with a tray carrying a pot and a cup. Ichiro noticed and, with upraised eyebrow, began steering the conversation to an end.

“Anyway, tell her I’m not interested, and that I’m unlikely to change my mind anytime soon. Yes. That’s right. That would be best, I think. Yes, thanks. Talk to you later.”

With the casual goodbye, he hung up.

The servant gave Ichiro a respectful bow, then poured the contents of the pot

into the cup. “Your coffee, Ichiro-sama.”

“Mm, thanks,” Ichiro responded, without so much as a smile.

Tsuwabuki kept a single live-in servant, who, incredibly, did her duties dressed as an old-fashioned Victorian maid. The outfit was by choice... her own, that is.

Sakurako Ogi was a live-in servant that Ichiro Tsuwabuki employed for his own amusement. He’d wanted a reasonably attractive, well-figured, well-educated girl, but she’d turned out to exceed his expectations, acting not only as a servant but as a secretary and chauffeur, as well.

The rest of her personality was... well, perhaps what you would expect from someone who wore a maid’s uniform for fun. Her room was full of stacks of manga, games, anime and tokusatsu DVDs, action figures, plamodels, and other bric-a-brac.

Ichiro once asked her what she would do if an earthquake hit, and her answer was a gravely serious, “I would die.” She had previously said that she would be happy to die surrounded by what she loved, so perhaps she really meant it.

“Was that the president of Tsunobeni?” she asked.

“Yes. He wanted to thank me for the financial advice I’d given him recently, and then we chatted for a while.”

She had come from a relatively ordinary family. The longer she worked with him, the better grasp she seemed to gain of her master’s relationships, but he could remember a time when she had expressed such astonishment at every big name he threw out, they could barely carry on a conversation.

“Sakurako-san, you enjoy games, don’t you?” he asked after taking a sip of his coffee and lifting his tablet off the table. Sakurako stared for a moment, then burst out into a smile.

“Oh, yes, I love them. And not just games, but manga and anime, too.”

Sakurako’s polite yet friendly speech was something Ichiro didn’t hear often from people around him. Frankly, it intrigued him, and was one of the reasons he had chosen to hire her.

“And recently, you’ve been playing *Narrow Fantasy Online,* correct?” He

tapped his touchpad to open the web browser. He'd been doing research on the game here and there since the previous night. Opinions were firmly divided, and many of them seemed to carry strange biases, which was making it hard for him to learn anything.

During his conversation with Asuha, he had recalled that Sakurako was a heavy user. And indeed, once the subject came up, she started talking with great excitement.

"*NaroFan!* I'm obsessed with it! Last week, when you spent five days in Yamanashi? I spent the whole time immersed in it!"

"Ah, I thought your room seemed messier than usual when I got back..."

"I still do the work you pay me for. I hope you can overlook a little dust on the shelves." Sakurako pouted as she handed him another cup of coffee.

"I was thinking I might try it out."

"What, really?!" Another big smile; Sakurako was the kind of girl who never held one expression for long. "I guess none of your friends play, do they? You'll have to use pick-up guilds for quests... that can be fun in its own way, but if you're just starting, I can teach you all kinds of things! What kind of race and class do you want? Have you picked your spec?"

There was an unusual joy in her voice. But then, she had always been a lively girl.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I suppose I'll choose when the time comes."

"I see! Well, the controls take a little learning, and it's easy to get motion sick, but knowing you, you'll probably get used to it right away, Ichiro-sama."

"Yes, I am a genius, after all."

"You are a genius, after all!"

Sakurako didn't even try to hide her excitement. She seemed to be enjoying the thought of playing a game with Ichiro. They'd known each other for five years, but this was the first time their interests had ever intersected. So perhaps it was to be expected.

“I’m surprised to hear you talking about things like this, Ichiro-sama. Usually I just see you gazing at bugs and grinning.”

“Nonsense. I’m sure that your expressions while consuming manga and anime are equally unbecoming of your good looks. The truth is, Asuha invited me.”

“Asuha, your second cousin? She’s in middle school, right?” That immediate recall spoke well for her memory.

“Yes. She turned 14 this year. She’s at least a decade younger than y—”

“Hey!” Sakurako thrust out a hand to cut him off. “Ichiro-sama, everyone has sensitive areas that should not be touched upon. To do so could be fatal.”

“Oh, I see.” She seemed to be quoting some novel or manga, but if she didn’t want it mentioned, he wouldn’t mention it.

Sakurako told him to wait just a moment, then walked off with the pot still on the table. He thought maybe she needed to finish something up the kitchen, but she returned soon afterward with something in her hands. It was the package for a game and some kind of large headgear.

“Here it is, Ichiro-sama!” she declared, her ponytail of wavy, chestnut hair swishing. “This is *NaroFan* and the Miraive!”

Ichiro picked up the “Miraive” she had offered him and gave it a look over. It was heavier than he had expected.

The Miraive Gear was the latest game hardware from Pony Entertainment, a large company that produced video games and systems. They had hired the inventor of Drive technology into their research division, and the system had come out just last year. The girl had gone independent after that and designed the MMORPG in question.

“So I’ll need one of these to play the game?”

“And of course, you’ll need an internet connection, too. Of course, the quantum connection in this house gives incredible bandwidth, so your home network environment should be smooth and crisp!”

“Glad to hear it.”

Ichiro had signed a special contract with a communications company to install

quantum internet in the apartment complex he owned. It allowed for far greater data transmission than the standard household connection. Even Ichiro knew that you needed just the right home setup to play online games smoothly, and he was once again glad that it wouldn't be any special trouble.

"Ichiro-sama, will you be going to buy a Miraive today?"

"Hmm." Ichiro handed the Miraive Gear back to Sakurako, then looked down at his tablet once more. "That's the Miraive Gear X, correct? The market version. The IPU is eight teraFLOPS? Quite impressive..."

"It's expensive, though, compared to other game hardware... And nowadays, most people play consumer games on mobile devices, so they really aren't selling that well."

Ichiro's tablet browser was opened to the Pony product information page. But it wasn't the home user page. It was the one for companies. "If I'm going to play, I'd like hardware with good specs."

"Oh, you mean the next-generation one? It's got a slightly bigger hard drive, and it's lighter. Though I've heard the first wave of them had a lot of bugs..."

"No, I mean this Miraive Gear Cocoon." Ichiro pointed to his tablet screen, and Sakurako's eyes went wide.

The screen displayed an apparatus with a curved form suggestive of a mini-car, along with a snappy catchphrase. The base color was metallic silver, with eye-catching black plastic transparent facings.

The near-future silhouette was similar to Sakurako's own Miraive Gear X, but the specs were totally different. The image processor's floating-point calculation was 200 teraFLOPS. It was like the supercomputers of ages past. What a terrifying world they lived in, for things like this to be in circulation on the general market.

Sakurako spoke up hesitantly, to confirm his statement. "Um, you mean this commercial hardware?"

"Yes, that one."

"The ones that arcades and network cafes use for their VR games?"

“Yes, those.”

“The super-expensive ones that even the biggest arcades can only afford one or two of?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Y-You’re going to *buy* one?!”

“It’s not as if it’s all that expensive. And if I’m going to play, I want to do it in the best environment possible,” Ichiro said, clearly ignoring her conversational hints.

Accustomed as Sakurako was to her master’s eccentricities, this still had her in a daze. Her already wide eyes opened even wider — an amusing sight, perhaps, to an outside observer.

“I-Ichiro-sama! I am but a commoner! Please do not commit such reckless spending in my presence! You don’t know what it’s doing to me!” Tears were building up in her eyes. Her plea seemed sincere, but Ichiro ignored that, too.

“I was thinking of buying one for you, too,” he said.

“Please do! Thank you!” she said immediately.

Sakurako was defeated. Greed was truly a terrifying thing.

Asuha Tsuwabuki was a 14-year-old girl attending a middle school in Nagoya.

She didn’t yet know what she wanted to be when she grew up.

She was related by blood to the Tsuwabuki family, who had run a zaibatsu in Satsuma, Kyushu, before the war. Her family tree was full of world-renowned celebrities, but her own family life was relatively banal.

Her father was a white-collar worker in the area, and her mother was just rather good at English. They were a slightly intellectual but otherwise ordinary husband and wife.

Asuha’s own personal achievements included taking second place in her elementary school traffic safety slogan contest and maybe being the ace pitcher for her rather weak elementary and middle school softball clubs.

A week ago, she had gone to her great-grandfather Hayato Tsuwabuki's birthday party... to invite her cousin Ichiro to play the VRMMORPG *Narrow Fantasy Online.*

The next day, when he had sent her an e-mail to announce that he was buying the game system and software, Asuha had nearly jumped in the air. She had wanted to log in immediately and go to meet him, but the thick wall of reality stood in her way: Term finals were coming up, and her parents had forbidden her from playing any online games.

So she sent Ichiro a tearful apology e-mail, then spent a week obsessively devoted to the pursuit of academic learning.

Ichiro responded with an e-mail asking her to meet up with him in-game the day the tests were over, and Asuha used that as fuel for her spirit, pencil gripped tightly in hand.

So tightly, in fact, that she had ruined five pencils by now. Never underestimate the grip strength of an ace pitcher.

At last, after conquering the fearsome foes known as English and math, she returned home in triumph. Her mother pulled out her Miraive Gear with a smile and a warning not to overindulge, and returned it to her.

"Asuha, I hear Ichiro's going to play with you. Is that right?" her mother asked with a knowing smile. "The family tells me that you don't talk about marrying him anymore, even when you go to Grandpa's house for New Year's."

"Stop talking about that!" She had been expecting to be teased about it, and having that confirmed just caused Asuha to bark out in protest. "I'm not a child anymore! I'm in middle school now!"

"Really? But you wanted to play a game with Ichiro, didn't you?"

"Yes, but... oh, never mind! I'll be down for dinner!" Asuha huffed as she stormed out of the kitchen.

As she stomped up the stairs, her obsession was already turning from academics to something else.

Her mother didn't understand anything. Asuha Tsuwabuki was no longer a

child. She was 14 years old, after all.

It was true that a long time ago, she had earned snickers by hanging on to “Itchy” and insisting she was going to marry him. She understood that. But that was in the past.

It had been allowed while her age was in single digits, but as of her tenth birthday, she had officially abandoned those childish ideas without a single particle of regret.

It was true that “Itchy,” Ichiro Tsuwabuki, was handsome and smart and really nice to her. Girls liked him because he was so rich. He was athletic, he was talented, he painted beautiful pictures, he played instruments and sang well, and he had great taste. And when they used to go shopping together, he always picked out the best outfits for her.

He was a wonderful man. And they were only second cousins, so there was no *legal* reason they couldn’t be married... but she was like a little sister to Itchy, and he would never see her as a romantic partner. Besides, as her grandmother said, unrequited first love was the most beautiful love of all.

But as for her motives this time around...

Yes, the reason she had invited Ichiro to play the game with her went beyond the mere childish impulse to spend time together. She wasn’t without an ulterior motive... but that motive was, yes, something *much* more profound. Something her mother wouldn’t understand.

Some of this introspection was just boasting to cover up her own blossoming embarrassment, but Asuha didn’t realize that, of course.

“Whew!” Asuha strode into her room with her Miraive Gear and slammed the door with a bang.

Six months ago, she had begun begging her parents to buy it for her. Of course, half of the cost had come out of her New Year’s money.

She hadn’t wanted it because of any interest in the game. She was looking for someone. There was someone inside the game that she had to find.

Unfortunately, the game world had turned out to be much bigger than she had

expected, and a character's level and spec severely limited where you could go. A nice older lady had told her that teaming up was the fastest way to advance, but no guild or party would take on a player like Asuha who was busy with real-life club activities, and game systems were expensive, so she couldn't just expect her friends to sign up.

That was where Ichiro came in.

Ichiro had more than enough money and time. He would probably conform to Asuha's schedule, and he was smart, so he could probably help her. At least, that was Asuha's thought.

Of course, Ichiro would start as a beginner, too. Asuha had been playing the game for far longer. This was, in fact, another important point for her. After all, Ichiro was the "flawless superhuman." It wasn't often that she'd have a chance to teach him something. Her straightforward leveling had born fruit, and Asuha's avatar was already in the high 30s. Thus, the first thing she would do was go around with Ichiro in the field and help him level up.

She chuckled as she turned on her Miraive Gear and connected it to the internet with her LAN cable. The corners of her mouth twitched upwards.

"Itchy, I'm not going to be a child forever."

She was going to shock him with how capable she'd become.

Although she did have to admit... Ichiro's live-in servant, the maid Sakurako, was a concern. She also played a lot of video games. Then again, she had lots of distractions, too. She had to clean Ichiro's big house, and prepare three meals a day. She probably hadn't played much more than Asuha.

Asuha didn't entirely trust Sakurako, who lived under the same roof as Ichiro. Asuha wanted Ichiro to settle down and get married already, but to nip in the bud any woman who didn't meet her standards was part of her duty as a second cousin.

"Okay..." Asuha held her Miraive Gear in both hands, knelt down on the bed, and closed her eyes. It was a mental preparation ritual that she employed when she needed to get pumped up. She did the same thing before softball tournaments.

There's so much I have to do in the game today. I have to meet Itchy, tell him the real reason I invited him, help him level up... And if Sakurako's along, I need to find out what kind of weird "help" she's been giving him, and put a stop to it... It'll be hard having to do it all by myself, but I'll do it.

Asuha put on her full face gear Miraive Gear X and lay down on the bed. She didn't know exactly how it worked, but there was a sensation, like strange waves getting into her head, and before long, her consciousness was completely severed from the real world.

Normally, as a commercial-use device, the Miraive Gear Cocoon came with a credit card slot. It was there to let you input your card information directly without having to type out the code every time, a perverse sort of consideration from the maker. But it was such a blatant feature that many users objected to it, enough so that the Cocoons found in internet cafes and arcades often had their card slots covered with tape or advertisements.

Nonsense.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki's philosophy was, "If you can use money, you should," and he had no scruples about inserting his black credit card into the slot. There was a type of virtual currency called Future Points that you could buy at convenience stores, but if he was buying anyway, he thought, why not just use a credit card directly?

The Cocoon's reclining seat seemed comfortable enough, if not quite on par with his Armonia luxury bed. He rested his entire body on the seat, then placed the helmet-like device — the commercial Miraive Gear X he had bought — over his entire face.

As always, he found it a bit stifling, a disappointment from a so-called state-of-the-art virtual reality device.

But that feeling only lasted for a minute as Ichiro felt his consciousness and senses gradually cut off from the real world, drawn into the artificial reality created by the Miraive Gear. Darkness and light wove together, forming a single icon in the user-controlled cyber space. "*Narrow Fantasy Online* Premium Pack."

There were two versions of *NaroFan* that consumers could buy: the standard

and limited editions. The limited edition, which offered exclusive classes and content, was one example of the game's bias in favor of users willing to invest more real-world currency.

This sometimes led to tragedies like user flaming and carelessly sold items being resold off for even higher prices, but Ichiro had no interest in such details — if it gave him more options, he wanted it. So he ended up paying an exorbitant price for a limited-edition pack picking up dust in the corner of an Akihabara shop. More could be said on this subject, but we'll save that for another time.

The words above it read: "Choose your game." It was likely that the Cocoons currently operating all over Japan displayed dozens of installed game icons in this virtual space. Nothing quite felt real here, but Ichiro merely thought "Touch it," and instantly, the game icon lit up.

The light consumed his "vision" and the logo for Pony Entertainment, Inc flashed up, followed by the one for Miraive Gear, then at the end, the name Thistle Corporation. All that trouble to create a virtual reality, yet this part wasn't any different from standard game hardware.

It was hard to concretely identify exactly when he passed from the real world into this cyberbrain space. Every time he put it on, he found himself there before he knew it. It was clear from the way it could trick the mind that the Miraive was a very advanced device.

He felt his consciousness bathed in light once more, and before long, it cleared. He was being moved — more precisely, the device was sending the illusion to his brain that he was being moved — to a place that, unlike the earlier cyberspace, came with a definite feeling of air and ground.

Ground, sky, and myriad objects. He was standing at the precise coordinates where he had been when he had logged out the night before.

Ichiro opened and closed his hands several times, testing the sensation. They felt exactly as they had a few minutes ago in the real world.

He had been at this for a week now, and he never stopped being impressed by that.

Yes, it had already been a week since Ichiro Tsuwabuki had begun playing *Narrow Fantasy Online.* Now that he was here in the fictional continent of Asgard, he was no longer Ichiro Tsuwabuki, heir to the Tsuwabuki Concern. He was Ichiro Tsuwabuki, Magi-Fencer of the Dragonet race.

That's right, if you can believe it — he named his character after himself.

As a dedicated player herself, Sakurako Ogi had gently admonished him for this. "Playing under your real name will make people think you're a land mine," she said. But Ichiro declared her concerns "nonsense."

"Land mine" was a term used for players who lacked the skill and etiquette to engage in proper party play, invoking the imagery of how stepping on a land mine could take off an arm or a leg.

In fact, it wasn't just the name. He had many of the telltale signs of being a land mine.

Thanks to Ichiro's nauseating real world belief that he was the apex of humanity, he'd made his avatar a faithful recreation of himself, from the graphics down to the voice. He couldn't remove the horns and tail native to the Dragonet race, but the Premium Pack-exclusive — in other words, pay-to-play — Dragonet was otherwise a faithful recreation of Ichiro himself.

So, if his avatar was a perfect self-insertion, then what about Sakurako Ogi's?

"Forgive the wait, Master Ichiro." A voice rang out, clear, yet carrying the weight of years. It resembled that of a now-deceased famous actor.

The speaker was a man in the prime of life, clad in full-body plate mail. He had short-cut silver hair and a scar that traced vertically from his forehead to his left cheek. His armor clinked with each step he took towards Ichiro.

"We logged in at the same time, Sakurako-san."

"Now, now!" At Ichiro's words, the man threw out a hand. "To use one's real name is counter to the rules of online etiquette. As of this moment, I am the somber front-line Knight, Sir Kirschwasser. My house has served House Tsuwabuki for generations."

"Yes, very well, if you insist."

“I mean it. You keep acting like you forgot and start calling me by my real name. You need to stop. It’s already been a week.”

“You’re dropping character, Sir Kirschwasser.”

Yes, shocking as it might seem, this was Sakurako. Of course, in a game, it was naturally possible to give your avatar a very different appearance from your own. But to pretend to be the opposite sex?

But while Sakurako admitted that you saw fewer people doing that in a VRMMO, where it was harder to get a third-person view of your avatar, playing as the opposite sex was an everyday occurrence in most online games. It was an unsettling thought.

“What *I* find hard to understand is why you want to play someone exactly like yourself in real life. Just how in love with yourself are you?” she demanded. Even the “loyal servant’s” tone was strange.

“It is not that I am in love with myself. I simply feel no need to lie about who I am.”

“You never want to try being someone else?”

“No.” As he spoke, Ichiro tapped the air twice with his index finger, and a semi-transparent browser window opened before his eyes.

“Oh, I see you’re getting used to that.”

“It has been a week, after all.”

This was a menu window. The care put into the depiction of *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s environment made it easy to forget you were in a virtual space, but a handful of elements did provide a reminder that it was all a game.

From the menu screen, you could change equipment, call items out of inventory, log friends, and buy virtual items. You could also access “Mirai Network,” a cyberbrain community formed between Miraive Gear players; read webpages; and download apps exclusive to the platform.

Ichiro’s window was already full of apps, both free and paid. He had been impressed by how much software they had that was useful for his businesses.

“Now, we don’t have much time.” Ichiro looked at the small clock at the

bottom of the menu screen.

“That’s right, isn’t today the day you’re meeting your cousin, Asuha? Do you know her avatar’s name?”

The game allowed multiple people to use the same avatar name, so just having the name wasn’t the final word in finding someone. Of course, without it, there was no way to even begin. Fortunately, Ichiro had asked for her character’s name in advance.

“Yes. I believe it was ‘Felicia.’”

“Felicia! I-Is Asuha a fighting gamer, by chance?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I believe it’s a reference to the blue felicia, a flower of the Asteraceae family, like the tsuwabuki.”

They were currently out on a map called the Volgund Volcanoes. According to Kirschwasser, it was the best place for building up levels and skill points, so they were there hard at work on the mundane task of leveling up. It would be a long walk to “Starter Town” where they were set to meet Asuha, a.k.a. Felicia.

As they walked down the mountain road, Kirschwasser spoke earnestly. “Ah, I wish I had a horse to get around. I am a Knight, after all. I get a bonus to my horseback riding skills.”

“Once *I* get a little more agility, I can learn ‘Dragon Wings.’”

“You sound rather pleased about that.”

“It’s just that, in the real world, I’ve never lacked for anything. In terms of both money and talents.” Ichiro gazed happily at the sky over the volcanoes.

“You’ve been focused on building up your strength stat lately, right?”

“Yes. But now that I’ve acquired ‘Break Object,’ I think I can lay off.”

“Oh, the Dragonet exclusive skill. That one didn’t look very useful in a fight, though it really does add flavor.”

“The game is so rigid about stats. Isn’t it wonderful not to have things go your way all the time?”

“Is it? What an enviable thing to enjoy,” Kirschwasser murmured.

There was acid in Kirschwasser's tone, but Ichiro shrugged it off like a Poison Toad hit in the face with "Water Spear." He was entirely shameless.

It may be time to explain the general ins and outs of *Narrow Fantasy Online.*

It was only the second VRMMO ever released, and in terms of both sales and active numbers, it far outstripped its predecessor.

It was published by the Thistle Corporation, the company founded by the girl who had developed the virtual reality Drive technology and participated personally in the creation of the Miraive Gear.

Thinking about it that way, it was understandable that it used the full potential of the Miraive Gear's specs to create such a big world and that so many of the players it attracted chose to stay.

Apparently the name "Narrow Fantasy" was a reference to the fact that even that huge game world was small compared to the VR worlds the company wanted to develop. The fact that it was first conceived of in a small research lab in a university was also suggested as a possible origin of the name. Either way, *Narrow Fantasy Online* plunged you into a wider world.

The game's "Grand Story" detailed how players were assuming the role of adventurers exploring the newly-discovered continent, Asgard, taming it, and unearthing the sleeping mysteries it contained. The players' information was managed by the Adventurers' Guild, and the dev team would sometimes assume the role of the guild when releasing new information.

The only things, stats-wise, that the players could choose when making their character were race and class.

Races were Human, Elf, Dwarf, four kinds of Anthromorph, and the Premium Pack exclusive races: High Elf, Dragonet, and Machina.

Classes ranged from more orthodox ones like Fighter and Mage to specialist ones like Alchemist, Grappler, and many others. The player could only choose one class at the start, but then add up to two subclasses, for a combined total of three.

Kirschwasser, for instance, was a Human, with Knight, Fighter, and Acolyte classes. His main class, Knight, excelled in defensive and mounted combat. His

subclasses were Fighter, which encouraged the growth of all physical stats, and Acolyte, which specialized in healing and support. The end result was a front-line tank made for drawing aggro. His offensive prowess was lower than DPS specialists of the same level range, but he was that much tougher for it.

“Do you enjoy playing that way?” Ichiro asked.

“As a tank? It’s not that I especially enjoy it,” Kirschwasser responded, rubbing his jaw. “But I suppose I do prefer support to being a damage-dealer. For instance, if an ally gets in trouble... Yes, let’s say he’s a high-DPS ally who could finish off the boss in one hit, but his life is low. That’s when I’d charge forward. I could absorb an attack that would knock out ten of him and shrug it off, and even if I died, it wouldn’t matter.”

“I find that very hard to understand.”

“That’s not terribly surprising... Oh, there it is.”

They had already moved from the volcanoes to a field. At the edge of the Vispiagna Meadow, a safe zone relatively free of dangerous monsters, stood a rather large harbor city known as “Starter Town.” It was bustling with beginner adventurers. Ichiro himself had started there just one week ago.

“Incidentally, I failed to ask Felicia’s... *Lady* Felicia’s race and class.”

“Were you trying to figure out what title to give her?”

“Do you know what they are?”

“She said her race was Human, and her class was Beast Tamer, I believe.”

Ichiro’s words inspired a thoughtful frown to come over Kirschwasser’s face. “I see. That’s quite a niche class.”

“Not many people use it?”

“More than use your Magi-Fencer class, Master Ichiro, but they are in a similar boat. As I explained to you, the most powerful characters in games like these tend to be specialist builds, who...”

“Ah, nonsense. Let’s save the lecture for another time.”

Kirschwasser — Sakurako Ogi — was a gamer. A heavy gamer, at that. Theories

about how to make a powerful avatar had been beaten into her head, and that expertise occasionally gave rise to a sort of grandmotherly solicitude.

But to Ichiro, it simply sounded like his loyal servant was scolding him. He was happy to listen to advice, but he did get bored with hearing the same thing over and over again.

At last, the two went through the gate to enter Starter Town.

“I haven’t been here in a week,” Ichiro commented.

“That’s true. You’ve become so much more impressive since then, they probably wouldn’t recognize you. Your equipment, especially.”

The outfit that Ichiro wore definitely stood out in this fantasy world. A lustrous pattern, like butterfly wings, stood out against his blue jacket and slacks. Beneath his jacket he wore a dress shirt that came with a visual effect of constantly producing a light magical mist, owing to the spiritwood of the Lancastio Spiritwood Sea from which it was made. The belt, the watch, and the leather shoes were all made from some of the hardest items in the game to acquire, and they complimented him perfectly, as if they’d all come custom-ordered from famous brand-name stores.

It seemed unbelievable that a person could get that far in just a week. The only disruption to his flawless image was the slightly tacky butterfly brooch at the chest, but Ichiro still acted terribly fond of it.

It was true to say that he’d grown so impressive that people wouldn’t recognize him. As usual, he turned heads, but it had less to do with his physical attractiveness and more for the way his equipment clashed with the fantasy setting around them.

“Yes, Iris did a fine job, too.” Ichiro’s mood was restored by getting to talk about his equipment.

“Do you think she might log in?”

“She appears to be busy with her term finals. It’s a shame. I had hoped to introduce her to Felicia.”

Soon, they reached the fountain plaza that was to serve as their meeting spot.

The area was crawling with new players and the mid-level players who'd likely invited them. He was thinking it would be hard to find Felicia in all this, but before he could even start searching, she found them.

"Itchy!"

There was a girl at a corner of the plaza waving cheerfully to them. He focused his attention on her and confirmed that the name above her head read "Felicia."

As she had described in their earlier communication, Felicia was a petite Human girl, though still a little taller than the real-life Asuha. She looked nothing like her, but the way she jumped up and down was so much like Asuha that it created an eerie sense of cognitive dissonance.

"Hey, Felicia," Ichiro said as he waved.

"She looks as cheerful as ever," Kirschwasser noted with a leisurely air.

"I've never talked to you in the game before! Itchy, I can call you Itchy, right? Since you used your real name!" She ran up to him, babbling on and on, clearly unable to conceal her excitement.

"I don't mind. I'll call you Felicia."

"Okay! Oh, that's right, Itchy, friending! Let's friend each other!"

Felicia knocked twice on thin air to open up the window. She worked so quickly that before he could even respond, "Friend request from Felicia" popped into the air right before his eyes.

As it was Felicia who invited him to the game, he had no reason to refuse. Ichiro touched "Yes." It was followed by a cheery automated noise, and the window displayed a new message.

"You are now friends with Felicia. Friends: 3. Remaining: 996."

"Yay! Itchy, let's work hard together!"

"Yes, let's."

She grabbed Ichiro's hand uninvited and began swinging it around. Then her eyes fell on the man beside him. Kirschwasser smiled awkwardly.

"Ah, ahem." He gave a little cough, then a real smile. "Would you kindly add

me, too?”

“Um, ah, okay...” Felicia was clearly surprised at being addressed by an avatar she’d never seen before.

“Ah, um... are you a friend of Itchy’s?”

“It’s Sakurako-san,” Ichiro answered.

“What?” Felicia asked, her brow furrowing at Kirschwasser.

“Master Ichiro, you gave it away too quickly.”

“It was tasteless of you to even think about hiding it in the first place.”

“Huh? Huh? Wh-What? Sakurako... you mean your servant?” Felicia was clearly at a loss. This was only natural.

Felicia, a.k.a. Asuha Tsuwabuki, had only come by Ichiro’s house two or three times. She had met Sakurako Ogi.

Sakurako was a bouncy, pretty servant girl who had wavy chestnut hair styled into a single ponytail and who dressed in a Victorian maid outfit. She was quite well-proportioned, as well.

But the person standing before Asuha Tsuwabuki, a.k.a. Felicia, was a silver-haired man who looked nothing like Sakura Ogi. His body was covered in plate mail, and he wore a Kite Shield and Knight Sword on his back. The scar on his face told of past noble deeds. And he was *extremely* well-proportioned.

Yes, it certainly was confusing trying to imagine them as the same person at first glance, thought Ichiro. But Kirschwasser confirmed it in his austere, clear voice.

“Yes, I am Sakurako Ogi!”

“You’re a man!” Felicia’s comment was certainly accurate.

“My avatar is a man. Is there something wrong with that? Part of the fun of this game is getting to be someone different than you are in real life.”

“W-Well... Ugh.” Perhaps it was because Felicia was aware that she had made an avatar much more attractive than she was. “But ugh. Ugh! Ugh!” she kept protesting, sounding a bit like a caveman.

“Now, Felicia, you improved yourself a good 20%, too.”

“I wasn’t trying to improve myself! Ugh! I just... ngh... I just...!”

Perhaps she had been rehearsing something she would say to Sakurako when she met her, and that something was precluded on her assumption that Sakurako’s avatar would be a beautiful, busty woman. When she instead turned out to be the silver-haired Knight Sir Kirschwasser, that had been cut off at the knees, and she could do nothing but sputter. Maybe that was it.

After a while, Felicia seemed to work through her internal conflict, though her breathing was still irregular and her shoulders were heaving. He hoped it wouldn't have any adverse effects on her out in the real world. It wasn't good to get oneself so worked up.

"W-Well, anyway! Itchy, you've been playing the game for a week, right?"

"Yes. The graphics are as lovely as you made them out to be. It's been a novel experience. The truth of it is, I'm enjoying myself."

Felicia smirked, and for some reason, she puffed up her chest. (Her chest was flat — it seemed that was one area she wasn't willing to exaggerate.)

"Itchy, what level are you?"

"92."

"You freaking idiot!"

"Nonsense. If I were an idiot, that would make everyone on Earth idiots by comparison. You mustn't insult yourself that way." Ichiro Tsuwabuki had an unparalleled way of doing something outrageous to get you mad at him, only to counter any anger with something even more outrageous. "By the way, why did you call me an idiot?"

"W-Well..." Felicia stammered.

"A-ha," Kirschwasser observed with a knowing nod. "I believe I understand.. Lady Felicia was hoping to help you level up."

"Ugh..." she groaned.

He was right on the mark, it seemed. Kirschwasser's sense of observation was sharp.

This, too, was only natural, Ichiro had to admit. Several years ago, Asuha Tsuwabuki had stopped clinging to him as much as she used to (though sometimes she looked like she wanted to), and since entering middle school, had grown very preoccupied with insisting that she was an adult. According to his cousin once removed, Asuha's father, she'd throw a fiery tantrum if he didn't buy her an adult ticket at the Toyama Zoo. That's the kind of person she was. She had probably wanted to earn his respect by showing him how to level up.

Thinking about it that way, perhaps he had acted rather thoughtlessly. Perhaps.

“How did you even get to such a high level, Itchy? I’ve been playing for three months, and I’m only level 40!”

Judging from her friend information, technically, she was 38.

“Are you quite certain you want to ask that?” Kirschwasser asked, his expression grave.

“Huh? Wh-What? Did you do something bad, Itchy?”

“Nonsense. It was all perfectly legal. Anyone can just *break* rules, after all. I dislike that practice.” The way Ichiro saw it, he had merely found the most efficient way of leveling up permitted by the rules. He couldn’t understand why this invited backbiting.

Kirschwasser ignored Ichiro’s expression and continued in somber tones.

“All right. Then I shall explain. The repulsive trick that Master Ichiro used to achieve the ridiculous level 92 in just one week...”

“Sir Kirschwasser, you appear to be enjoying this.”

“You can tell? Ah, incidentally, I’ve been logging in consistently between my working hours since the service began, and I’m currently level 68. I’ve been doing this for almost a year, so getting to 40 in three months is an excellent pace.” Kirschwasser’s solicitousness in praising Felicia’s hard work was proof that he was a grown woman... Well, a grown man, at the moment.

“U-Um. Mr. Kirschwasser.”

“Just call me Kirsch.”

“Mr. Kirsch. Well, er, how exactly did Itchy level up?”

“The power of money,” Kirschwasser murmured, gazing off into the distance.

Narrow Fantasy Online was a game packed with paid content options. Though even the base subscription fee of 980 yen a month was hard on the wallet for school-aged gamers like Felicia...

In addition to that basic fee, there was the “Extra Course,” which increased the

wares available in NPC shops and lowered their cost, and the “Royal Course,” which slightly increased the money and EXP you got from defeating monsters (by 10%). There was also the “Starter Course,” which thankfully could only be used during the first month of play, that gave you extra bonuses for things like income and EXP.

There were other options besides these as well, but suffice it to say for now that there was a wealth of paid content.

The “Basic Item Pack” let you buy packs of potions and other consumables with real money, and “Booster Pack” gave you significant boosts to the money or EXP you earned for 24 hours. Some might say there were almost too many options, but for working adults who didn’t have a lot of time, they were useful methods for catching up with the heavy users.

Ichiro couldn’t be bothered to explore them thoroughly, so he had just bought them all, and that had transformed him into a boost bonus demon.

That wasn’t all.

He had also indulged himself in every kind of microtransaction available, and tried every equip item they offered. If he had found out something wouldn’t be useful, he had sold it without hesitation. Microtransaction-only items had a low resell cost to prevent a technique known as “alchemy,” but Ichiro never hesitated.

In this regard, Ichiro had been lucky to be accompanied by a heavy gamer like Kirschwasser. Kirschwasser had taken him to a region full of monsters that would be hard to beat at his early levels and walked him through some highly efficient power-leveling.

And so his level rose. It rose ridiculously fast. It rose faster than Japan’s economy during the bubble.

It wasn’t just his level, either. Because he was getting double or triple the money and skill points he would normally acquire, he was even stronger than his hard numbers would indicate. Skill points were especially valuable, since passive skills had a tremendous influence on your stats. As the points came rolling in, Ichiro invested them in powerful skills, propelling even his “garbage class” Magi-Fencer into a force to be reckoned with.

And the next thing they knew...

By the time a week had passed, Ichiro's level had far surpassed Kirschwasser's.

"I'm speechless!" Felicia cried.

"If you're speechless, how are you talking?" Ichiro replied, a slightly twisted answer to her cry of the soul.

"Oh, but it was a terrifying sight..." Kirschwasser continued in serious tones.

"Using money to level up is cheating!" Felicia complained.

"Nonsense. I'm using money that I earned myself. In other words, it's an extension of my personal ability. Using that to buy abilities in the game is the opposite of cheating." The capacity for saying insane things with perfect sincerity was one of Ichiro Tsuwabuki's most terrifying talents.

Perhaps it was the fault of the developer for pushing the Premium Pack and giving such preference to paid content users. But Thistle Corporation was a small business, after all. Considering the huge server costs, the quantum connection network fees, the development fees, and other maintenance costs to keep the service going, maybe that was necessary.

"Ugh... Adults don't play fair. Mr. Kirsch..."

"Well, I'm an adult, too... But please don't cry, Lady Felicia. Someday you'll be able to not play fair, too." Kirschwasser's words were not terribly comforting.

"So, Felicia." Perhaps he thought it was about time to get down to the real business, because Ichiro changed the subject. "Why don't you tell me the real reason you invited me to play the game?"

"Oh, okay... You noticed, huh? I guess it figures..." Felicia wiped away tears as she spoke. Even then, it required a few seconds before she could speak. She wasn't sure if she was considering her words, or if she was just a little hesitant to say them. "The truth is, Itchy, I want you to help me find a friend."

"A friend?"

"Of yours, Lady Felicia?"

Felicia nodded to their questions.

This was her story:

Asuha Tsuwabuki had a friend she had been close to since their last years in elementary school. That friend's name was Sera Kiryu. They'd gone to the same middle school, but had been in different classes in their first and second years and had grown rather estranged as a result. Asuha had joined the girls' softball club, and she hadn't asked what club Sera had joined. Even so, she had assumed they were still friends.

This had resulted in a rude awakening exactly three months ago.

On a whim, Asuha had decided to visit her friend's class to catch up. It was then, for the first time, that she learned what middle school had really been like for Sera Kiryu.

Sera had effectively dropped out of school and hadn't been seen there for all of six months. The cause? Bullying.

"I feel kind of... responsible," Felicia explained.

"For not realizing?" Ichiro asked.

"Yeah..."

Certainly, it was possible that Sera Kiryu had tried to reach out to Asuha for aid in some subtle way. But even if that had been the case, it wouldn't have been Asuha's fault for not noticing. It would have been simple for Ichiro to say something like that, but he didn't.

"So when I learned that Kiryu was playing this game, I thought the best way to make contact would be to sign up myself."

"But you hit a wall?"

"Well, it really is a big game..."

Certainly, the continent of Asgard, as depicted in *Narrow Fantasy Online,* was vast. The highly detailed lighting technology earned rave reviews, but it wasn't cut out for finding people. And Sera Kiryu's avatar wouldn't necessarily have the same name or appearance as the person Asuha knew.

"So I thought maybe you might help me, Itchy..." Felicia looked up at him with a gaze that contained a complicated mixture of emotions.

“Certainly,” he said.

“For real?!”

“I can’t believe you agreed so easily...” Kirschwasser muttered.

From the start, he had known she would want to ask him for something. He hadn’t imagined it would be about finding someone, but he couldn’t just turn down a request from his dear second cousin. And he was rather pleased to see the girl who had once clung to him so tightly now trying to help someone else.

“Do you know your friend’s avatar name?” Kirschwasser asked.

“Yeah, but nothing else,” Felicia answered.

Which meant that was the only clue they had. It was better than nothing, but it wouldn’t be easy.

“It’s Kirihito.”

“Oh-ho!” Felicia’s answer elicited a pleased response from Kirschwasser. “That’s the protagonist of a famous novel about a VRMMO. My, your friend has such good taste. They recently made an anime out of it, too.”

“I’ve never read it, myself.”

“Well, it is a light novel. He dresses all in black, and carries a single sword.”

As he listened, Ichiro began to feel a faint sense of unease. “If that’s Kirihito, I think I’ve seen him before.”

“Oh, what a coincidence. I believe I have, too.”

Felicia did not light up at their exchange. To the contrary, a pained expression appeared on her face. “Yeah, I have, too...”

Just then, the avatar of a young man passed between them, dressed in a black coat. Above his head shone the name “Kirihito.” There was no missing it. But it didn’t light her up at all.

Ichiro, Felicia, and Kirschwasser turned back to the fountain plaza of Starter Town.

A black coat and a single sword. There was a huge throng of such players crowding around the fountain. Some were beginners, some were intermediate

players. And the avatar name for every one of them was “Kirihito.”

2 - Noble Son, Search

In recent years, more and more MMORPG players had been opting to enjoy the game on their own, rather than joining a party. They were called “solo players.”

To find the company of others undesirable even in a virtual space certainly seemed to be the story of the modern era. But as the online world merely reflected the tendencies of outward society, it would be hard to pass judgment from outside.

Of course, as long as the games were designed to encourage party play, it would be extremely hard to continue solo play on the front lines of a game’s expanding content. Many of the most powerful monsters had stats that were leagues above any individual player, and it was impossible for one person to keep up with the infinitely spawning monsters all alone.

That applied even more in a VRMMO.

VRMMOs were played from a first-person perspective, so there were more blind spots than you would have in a traditional third-person game. It was far easier for one small miscalculation to result in you being surrounded by mobs. There were no convenient controller functions for checking 360 degrees around you, either, and the player’s own fatigue was reflected directly in the character’s abilities. Even in the top VRMMO title, *Narrow Fantasy Online,* you wouldn’t see anyone playing solo on its newest content map, the Delve Necrolands.

With one exception.

In the ruined city that stood at the center of the Necrolands, a black shadow raced. Points of armor covered each of the young man’s joints, over a leather jacket — beginner’s equipment. His magic-resistant coat fluttered in the wind as he danced through the land of Delve, flirting with death.

He clicked his tongue as he cut a bold stroke downward with his sword. The sword — a plain blade, bearing neither inscription nor decoration — flashed,

unleashing a spirited spray of blood. A four-digit number popped up before him, and his victim could not even breathe out a curse before it faded away.

As he pulled back his sword, it sliced through the zombies that were beginning to pile on him from all sides.

In the game world, no matter how violently he used his sword, the clots of blood would not dull the edge. As long as the weapon had plenty of Durability remaining, there was no reason he couldn't just keep slashing his heart out. He thrust forward, then brought it up diagonally to his shoulder, opening up a new path before charging forward again.

Yes, this was the world of the game. The tale of a distant world cut off from reality.

He was well aware that his real-world self was a small-framed human merely playing the role of this intrepid Fighter. This ultimate warrior, cutting down the hordes of charging demons, only existed here in this virtual world.

I know that. I know it's all a lie. A fake. An illusion.

But being the strongest in a world of illusion still had some value.

A tool to forget my weaker self. An ideal of strength to aspire to out there in reality. To understand what that looks like, I have to keep fighting.

And when at last the image of that sword-wielding warrior and the frail child of the real world cowering in the corner overlapped, then...

Yes. Then there would no longer be any difference between the reality and the fiction.

A stench arose from the invading hordes around him. Here in Delve, there was only one debuff effect that you couldn't avoid with "Pain Blocking." It was a mob-exclusive skill possessed by some of the local monsters: "Stench of Stagnant Rot." Not only was it unpleasant for the player, it limited the actions the character could take.

The young man stopped for a minute, seeking out the source of the stench.

There was a rumbling sound. His sword still drawn, the young man quickly scanned his surroundings.

“Uuuuuuogh... uuuuuuuuuogh...” An eerie wail rose up, resounding as if from the depths of hell.

A giant creature rose from the shadow of a half-destroyed building. In real-world terms, it would have been about twelve meters tall. It was impressive, but it wasn’t a boss mob. They didn’t spawn often, but it was still just a regular monster.

“Zombie Legion.” The necromancer who made his home in the Necrolands slapped corpses together like meatballs to make these twisted works of art. They had a skill called “Race Absorption” which let them pull in Greater Zombies they met along their path to restore their HP, and their toughness was feared by even many top players.

The empty eyes of the zombies turned towards him en masse.

It was a sight to make the hair on a person’s neck stand up, but the warrior did not falter. He knew what he had to do. He had to fight, and he had to win, and that was all. Any mob he met on his way was just a gauntlet thrown to him by the system. He would accept it and cut it down.

Due to their low spawn rate and extreme power, the Zombie Legion’s AI patterns hadn’t been verified, but as it saw him, it began slowly changing its path, heading towards him. It slunk purposefully across the earth, grinding the zombies milling around its feet into the ground as it progressed.

The sword he had been wielding in one hand he now took in both as he glared directly at the Zombie Legion. He nearly licked his lips in anticipation.

Like a pitcher taking the mound at the bottom of the ninth.

Like a striker glaring at the goal during a penalty kickoff.

Like a runner at the starting line for the championship race.

Out of everyone on the front lines of *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s new content, he was the only one who had continued playing solo. He hadn’t bought a single microtransaction. He was just an ordinary man who had worked hard to increase his own level and skills. Yet there was not a single heavy online gamer, international or domestic, who did not know of him.

The Japanese gaming champ. Real name unknown. Past unknown. True face unknown. Age unknown. Gender unknown. Nothing at all was known about this widely-renowned player.

But from time to time, he surfaced in some online game, charged forward with purely solo play, and became one of that game's top players. He was, naturally, undefeated in fighting games, as well. The name usually changed in some basic ways from game to game, but there was no mistaking that that unflinching stance belonged to just one person.

Most gamers, out of reverence, as well as to separate him from the copious other avatars with the same name, called him this:

King Kirihito.

A slash of his sword.

As he brought it back towards him, a visual effect exploded outwards. The giant Zombie Legion slowly began to crumble. He was victorious, and yet... a chill ran through his heart.

Yes, I've grown strong, but this is still just lines of code. The true enemy I need to fight is something fundamentally different.

He wondered if he was strong enough to fight "them" as he was now. Would he be able to keep his cool in the face of overwhelming malice and animosity?

He wasn't sure. And he couldn't stop until he was.

"Why don't we try the Grand Quest?" They were taking a break on the cafe terrace when Kirschwasser proposed the idea.

Their decision to search for Felicia's friend had already run aground on the terrible realization that their one clue, the avatar name "Kirihito," was not going to be useful in the slightest. Ichiro and Felicia had been counting the Kirihitos coming and going along main street in Starter Town.

"It's only natural that the leading VRMMO would have a lot of players naming their avatar 'Kirihito.' You can't swing a dead cat without hitting one! But the majority of them will be casuals or beginners."

Kirschwasser seemed to be building up to something. Ichiro and Felicia prompted him onward with genuine curiosity.

“But Kiryu, who has been playing the game since October, without even going to school, should be among the ranks of the top players by now.”

“Hence the Grand Quest?”

“Yes.”

Grand Quests were large-scale event quests that tied in to the overall story of *NaroFan.* Generally they were engaged in by players strong enough to explore new content without fear. By clearing the event, they could open up new fields and towns.

In other words, they triggered game updates.

Narrow Fantasy Online had a huge update coming up in August to mark its one-year anniversary, and there were currently a number of smaller-scale updates and events being held in preparation for that. But the one all the top players were focused on was the Grand Quest. As one of those top players, Sera Kiryu, a.k.a. Kirihito, was likely to be there, as well.

“Also, the higher the level of the area we’re in, the fewer Kirihitos we’re going to run into.”

“Natural selection, right?”

“Yes. Contact with the harsh environment will weed out the casual Kirihitos.”

If they went to where the Grand Quest was being held, there would be fewer Kirihitos, increasing the likelihood that any they met would be Sera Kiryu. That was what Kirschwasser was getting at, and Ichiro did agree that it seemed the best way to find Sera.

But there was just one problem. He raised a finger to point it out. “It’s going to be difficult for Felicia to survive in that high-level environment.”

“True...”

The level range for top players was somewhere between 90 and 120. Ichiro just barely qualified, but it would be hard going even for the level 68 Kirschwasser. Felicia was only level 38. She was in for a lot of trouble.

But Ichiro continued. “If Felicia’s the only one having problems, then you and I just need to keep her safe.”

“True.”

“Um, um...” Felicia, naturally, was hesitant to agree to this arrangement.

“Now, there’s no need to worry. Kirschwasser here can tank while I annihilate our enemies. And I have an infinite supply of recovery items.” As he spoke, Ichiro opened up the menu window and began manipulating the panel with well-practiced gestures.

With a pop, potions and fatigue recovery items appeared on the table.

“Itchy, did you just buy those?!”

“Yes, why?”

“Why did you do that?”

“Felt like it.”

There were many reasons to purchase downloadable content in a game, but that was probably the worst one imaginable.

Kirschwasser picked that very excellent moment to change the subject. “If I may, Lady Felicia, you are a Beast Tamer, are you not?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Beast Tamer was a “flavor class.” You could form contracts with a monster in the wild and summon it to fight for you, but in order to level up your monsters, you had to invest your own skill points in them. Of course, the Beast Tamer’s own stats increased as they leveled up, but they tended to have fewer skills with lower skill levels than other classes of the same level, so they ended up falling behind. Thus, it was a class you saw less of as you got to higher-level areas.

Ichiro’s Magi-Fencer was also a flavor class. In his case, this was because it required an equal division of skill points between physical stats and magic stats, creating a “jack of all trades and master of none.” They definitely tended to be weaker than other players of the same level.

“I think I’ve got Thief and Scout classes, too, though I’ve given almost all my

skills and arts to my monster.”

“What monster did you contract?”

“Power Golem.”

“How Spartan... I thought you might pick something a little fluffier.”

It was a monster you saw from time to time in the Wrath Wyrmhollows, an artificial weapon made by an ancient culture that had once existed on the continent of Asgard. They were said to be related in some way to the player race Machina — at least, that was what the setting notes said, anyway. They were quite strong and extremely tough. Depending on how she had raised it, it could potentially serve as a tank in Kirschwasser’s place.

At Kirschwasser’s words, Felicia smiled brightly and nodded. “Yeah, and, um... a player who came with me when I contracted it said that if you’re going to raise a monster, you should specialize it, so I focused on skills that would increase its power and endurance!”

“Excellent.”

“Felicia, could you call it out now?” Ichiro couldn’t help but be curious himself.

“Huh? R-Right here?”

“If it’s possible.”

“It is possible, but... here?” Felicia scratched her cheek shyly.

“Is there a reason you don’t want to?”

“W-Well, I’ve specialized it so much, it’s a little embarrassing...”

“There’s no need to be embarrassed. Specialization is one of the fundamentals of character building,” Kirschwasser said, assuming a lecturer’s air.

He seemed just as curious as Ichiro as to what sort of creature Felicia’s partner monster was. Since you saw fewer and fewer Beast Tamers as you got to higher levels, it was a natural curiosity.

Felicia was still embarrassed, but she seemed to steel herself, and drew out her dagger. It was known as the Dominion Dagger, and it was a type of Tamer Stick, a weapon unique to Beast Tamers. You played it like an instrument, and the

sound controlled the monster. Felicia put her mouth to the Dominion Dagger, and suddenly, a shadow fell around them.

“Oh?”

That was strange. Starter Town was always sunny. Kirschwasser looked off the terrace as he noticed the ground suddenly racked by tremors. It was there that he realized why Felicia was so embarrassed.

Towering over everything from the fountain plaza to main street was a massive iron giant standing at least fifty meters tall. The Power Golems Kirschwasser had encountered had topped out at four meters. This one definitely looked strong and sturdy.

“Well, that’s big,” Ichiro murmured while sipping his tea. “If it flies, that would expedite our travels.”

“Oh, it flies. The only skills I gave it were ‘Giant Servant’ and ‘Flying Servant.’”

An extremely specialized build. But then Felicia hung her head in embarrassment.

“But its fatigue limit is really low... it can only go for about three minutes before it runs out of gas...”

“That’s not a problem. I have fatigue recovery items. See?” Ichiro manipulated the menu, causing fatigue recovery potions to spill out onto the tabletop. In bottles, of course.

“Itchy! Stop reflexively microtransacting!”

“But you would be an excellent Beast Tamer if you could surmount the gas mileage problem. Right, Kirschwasser?”

“Well, that’s true... But...” Kirschwasser murmured as he gazed at the giant golem looming over the terrace. “It is blocking the street, so you may wish to take it away for now.”

In this game, when you were in a town, no matter what kind of physical blows you took, you couldn’t lose HP. Cries of resentment rose up from the Kirihitos trapped beneath the feet of the enormous golem.

Kirschwasser listened to their screams and mulled over the pros and cons of

immortality.

It would be difficult to sum up the terrain of the continent of Asgard in just a few words.

Players took the role of adventurers, began in Starter Town at the continent's easternmost point, then headed west to tame the land.

Once they found their footing, they could cross the Volgund Volcanoes and arrive at Glasgovara Merchant Town, where they could buy equipment prepared by manufacturing-class players before heading further west. They would then pass through a number of small villages and come out at the Great Sandsea.

Because that field was so big, people generally had to make use of the NPC-run "Sandship" service to get around. To get to the Necrolands, you had to go due west from there.

To the north of the Sandsea was the Doom Range; to the south was a large body of water called the Mediterra Demon Sea. And to the west were the Delve Necrolands, the site of the current Grand Quest.

The players had hypothesized from early on that the Delve Necrolands would be the site of the next expansion quest, so the majority of exploration and cataloging was already being done there. But the public announcement of the Grand Quest had brought even more explorers.

A massive object tore through the sky above that great desert: a Power Golem.

"It's been nearly a year since I started playing this game," Kirschwasser said gravely from his place riding in the golem's hand. "But I never thought I would be traveling around in this fashion."

"Although having to refuel it every three minutes is quite annoying," Ichiro commented. Over and over again, Ichiro purchased a "Basic Item Pack" from the microtransaction menu and gave Felicia the item she needed to give the golem.

"I would never have thought of refueling it this way, either..." Felicia muttered as she gave the fatigue restoration item to the golem.

"Perhaps we all would have been happier never knowing about it..." Kirschwasser agreed.

“I see no issue with using money to solve problems, where possible,” Ichiro said.

“Whenever you say that, Master Ichiro, I... no, never mind.”

In the end, Ichiro, Felicia, and Kirschwasser had decided to head for the Delve Necrolands, the site of the Grand Quest. It was said to be full of high-level zombies; not a place that was good for your heart, by any standard.

“Felicia, what kind of person is Sera Kiryu?” Ichiro asked, trying to cut through the boredom of the long trip through the sky.

“Oh, um...” Felicia started. “Cool, I guess...”

“Hm.”

“Hard to read. Quiet. But... capable, or so I thought. That’s why I was surprised when I learned about the bullying and the dropping out of school.”

She had heard that people like that were the ones whose personalities changed the most in online games, but she’d never been inclined to put much stock in a stereotype.

“And then escaping into a game like that...” she continued... “I couldn’t believe it.”

“Everyone needs a retreat now and again,” Ichiro offered as he handed her his umpteenth pay-to-download fatigue restoration item.

“Have you ever run away from anything, Itchy?”

“I have not. I’ve always been the strongest and best in every situation I’ve ever been in.”

“Oh, really! How incredible!” Felicia snatched the item away from Ichiro, clearly angry about something.

“It’s difficult for me to imagine someone using the game as a means of escape,” Kirschwasser murmured as he gazed at the scenery. It was a reasonable perspective from a gamer. “Perhaps it’s merely a vehicle for something healthier.”

“Like what?” Felicia asked.

“A... A proxy method for learning how to deal with reality... perhaps.”

“How is that any different from running away?” she shot back.

Felicia’s response was surprisingly responsible coming from a 14-year-old, and Sir Kirschwasser did not try to argue.

Bullying...

Ichiro was not unfamiliar with the experience. The college he had attended in America was reasonably sympathetic to both grade-skippers and foreigners, but he had still experienced jealousy and scorn. He had been an eccentric person even back then, so he hadn’t let it bother him. But it had been an education in how malicious people could be.

“Incidentally, Felicia. There’s something I forgot to mention earlier.”

“What is it?”

Ichiro gazed at the desert spreading out below the golem’s hand as he spoke. Far in the distance, a set of ruins — the Necrolands, most likely — could be seen.

“I have agreed to help you find your friend, but that is as far as my assistance goes. What happens after that will be up to you, and none of my concern.”

A silence fell on the group after that. Neither Felicia nor Kirschwasser said anything. But a few seconds later, Felicia nodded forcefully.

“Okay. Got it.”

“Wow...” The sound that poured from Felicia’s mouth was full of wonder.

It was a stuffy little town, crowded with an array of elite players unlike anything an intermediate player like her had ever seen before. (Of course, Ichiro and Kirschwasser could be regarded as such elite players, but she didn’t think of them that way.)

These were the Achievers and Explorers that pushed the front lines of *NaroFan.* Most of them were brawny, and those that weren’t projected an atmosphere of grandeur to a novice, with their glorious equipment and their air of mastery of everything around them.

This was the frontline base for the domination of the Delve Necrolands.

It was a snug little town sandwiched between the spacious fields of the Necrolands and the Great Sandsea. Registration for the Grand Quest took place in this town, and during the event, it was extremely lively.

“Ohh...” Kirschwasser moaned. “Just as one would expect of the Grand Quest. The participating players are all so impressive.”

“Are there any celebrities here?” Ichiro asked.

Kirschwasser nodded, and to illustrate, he pointed out a hard-faced giant standing not far from them. The man was swarthy, with close-cropped crimson hair and a hawk-like nose. He was clad in full-body red plate armor and held a greatsword in one hand as he spoke seriously with his allies around him. With him were a Dwarf with a catfish mustache, a female Knight dressed in white porcelain armor, and other seeming long-time veterans.

“They’re known as the Sunset Knights. They’re a guild of Achievers, said to be the strongest in the game. The leader is Stroganoff the Monstrous. His sub-commanders are Baron Gazpacho and Saint Tiramisu.”

“Sounds like a delicious group.”

“The word is that their leader runs a restaurant in real life.”

Ichiro wondered if it was healthy for someone with such a busy job to be working so hard at a VRMMO that he advanced to the top of the player ranks.

“There’s Matsunaga, the leader of the Dual Serpents, an explorers’ guild.” Kirschwasser now indicated an Elf clad in a dark green coat.

He was a truly beautiful man, but his carefully guarded, darting eyes gave the impression of a bird of prey. Around him stood an indistinguishable band of avatars all dressed in the same dark green coats and Detect Goggles, bowguns at the ready.

“They’re greatly feared for their highly polished and extremely thorough teamwork, though they’d probably lose to the Knights if it came to an out-and-out fight. Whenever a new field is opened, they’ll be the first ones to rush in and catalog all the mob appearance rates and trap gimmicks.”

“Matsunaga is the name of the person who runs the VRMMO wiki, isn’t it?”

“They do appear to be one and the same. He runs a VRMMO news aggregator site, as well. He apparently makes quite a living off of affiliate advertising. I admit, I’m jealous.”

Felicia had seen a little bit of the official site, too, but she was more curious about something else. She tugged on Kirschwasser’s sleeve.

“Mr. Kirsch, you seem to be enjoying this.”

“Describing all the strongest people here feels like a scene out of a manga. Isn’t it exciting?”

“But don’t the people described in those scenes usually end up losing to make someone else look more powerful?”

“Perhaps so.” It seemed Kirschwasser wasn’t thinking about it all that deeply.

“I see members of the Akihabara Forging Guild, too,” Ichiro murmured to himself, staring off into the distance.

“It seems like it,” Kirschwasser agreed.

They were looking in the direction of a diminutive Dwarf with a white mustache and a Machina in full plate mail. Perhaps it wasn’t surprising to see Premium Pack-exclusive races here on the front lines.

“Itchy, do you know them?” She couldn’t imagine he’d done a whole lot of research on the game’s heavy users in advance.

“They’re a manufacturing guild that operates primarily in the merchant town. We had a few minor interactions in the week before I met up with you.”

Though extremely curious about those “interactions,” Felicia opted not to pry any further.

Ichiro liked using roundabout turns of phrase, but he wasn’t an especially secretive person, which meant that when he did intentionally avoid talking about something, there was nothing you could do to make him loosen his lips.

“Speaking of which, I’ve never seen any of that stuff of yours before, Itchy.” Hunting around for a new subject to switch to, Felicia settled upon the subject

of his “armor.”

He wore a black jacket and trousers that quite resembled the suit he had worn to their great-grandfather’s party. The design certainly stood out in the middle ages fantasy world of *NaroFan.*

At last, Ichiro turned his gaze back to Felicia and smiled. It was a very nice smile, one that she hadn’t seen from him much lately. It took her aback. “Yes, isn’t it a nice design? I’m the only one in this game who has one like it. If we have time later, I’ll tell you the story of how I got it.”

Ichiro had always seemed so bored with everything lately, it was a surprise for her to see him looking so satisfied about anything. It set her heart racing, but at the same time, it unsettled her.

“Itchy... Did something good happen to you?”

“I suppose it did. I think I might come to like this game a great deal.”

She should have been happy to hear that, but it set her stomach churning for some reason. She couldn’t quite tell the source of her unease, either, which she didn’t like one bit.

Before that dissatisfaction could register on the surface, though, Kirschwasser interrupted with a small cough. “Um... ahem!”

That was right. He had been in the middle of his own explanation. Ichiro and Felicia decided to quiet down and hear the rest of the elder Knight’s words.

“There are many other famous guilds, but those are the three big ones in *NaroFan.*”

Now that he mentioned it, a lot of players were looking at them from afar and whispering to each other. The Red Sunset Knights, the Dual Serpents, the Akihabara Forging Guild... They all had different objectives, but it was still impressive to see them all together. Each member wore their guild’s crest at the front of their collar.

Ichiro and Felicia craned their necks around, and both spoke up simultaneously.

“Oh, it’s Kirihito.”

“Hey, it’s Kirihito.”

Hearing this, Kirschwasser turned his head reflexively. He laughed. “I suppose Kirihitos haven’t gotten rare at this stage at all...”

Indeed, there were Kirihitos here.

And not just one or two. They were looking at a group of identical child-faced and diminutive young men with black hair, black armor, and all carrying a straight-edged sword. A veritable swarm of Kirihitos. At the collar of their tie-in armor — whose stats seemed a little insufficient for their level range — the Kirihitos had all mapped a texture of an original crest design.

Unlike the unruly mass of Kirihitos walking every which way in Starter Town, it was clear from their synchronized walking motions that these ones were well-trained. Their faces were all nearly identical, as well, with a level of detail that suggested a great deal more passion than most.

“What the heck? Isn’t that kind of creepy?” Felicia asked.

“It’s a combat guild called ‘The Kirihitters,’ apparently. It was founded by a passionate fan of that story I mentioned before. The only membership requirement is ‘be Kirihito,’ but I didn’t think they were powerful enough to join the Grand Quest.”

The leader of the Kirihitters, whose avatar name was “Kirihito (Leader),” seemed to hear them talking, and walked briskly up to them.

“It’s been tough, y’know? We’re all Fighters, which throws off the balance a lot.”

“I bet it would...”

“Will you be joining the Grand Quest, too?” Kirihito (Leader) asked.

It was Ichiro who responded. “As a matter of fact, we’re searching for a Kirihito.”

“I see. Well, take your pick.” The other six Kirihitos all struck poses at Kirihito (Leader)’s prompting. Each pose was a little different, reflecting their individuality. It was a little overly precious.

“You’re all very nice Kirihitos, but not the one we’re looking for. Now, do you

know of any Kirihitos who began playing sometime between August and October of last year?" Ichiro asked, cutting right to the heart of the matter. At times like these, he was honestly very useful to have around.

The Kirihitos looked at each other and began an earnest discussion. It seemed the Kirihito they were looking for was not among them, but they might have a clue as to who it was. After they talked for a while, Kirihito (Leader) turned back to them with a serious expression.

"We believe you're referring to the legendary 'King Kirihito.'"

"K-King Kirihito?" Felicia asked, her voice cracking.

"He's a solo player who fights on the front lines here in the Delve Necrolands. We'd like to meet him, too."

Kirschwasser raised a brow in surprise. "A solo player? Really? In the Delve Necrolands?"

"Yeah. Incredible, right? We hear he's a Fighter who dresses all in black and uses a straight sword as his main weapon."

"Oh-ho. I see. The Kirihito from the novel was a solo player, wasn't he?" the silver-haired Knight asked.

Kirihito (Leader) nodded in confirmation.

To play solo in the Delve Necrolands, the game's highest-level story content, was an act of madness. Character death was penalized in this game. It resulted in the loss of all your items, so even elite players strove to avoid it at all costs. One death could mean the loss of hundreds of hours of work in an instant. That fear deterred most players from foolish attempts at solo play as they got closer and closer to the top ranks.

As the man talked, only Kirschwasser noticed that Ichiro had closed his eyes, as though thinking about something.

“That’s why, out of respect, we call him the ultimate Kirihito... King Kirihito.”

“I can’t imagine anyone appreciating that...” Felicia muttered.

Felicia’s words were accurate; the title was fatally lame.

But King Kirihito was the only person Kirihito (Leader) could think of that would have begun playing sometime between August and October — in other words, the time when Sera Kiryu had first stopped going to school. Did that mean this King Kirihito was her friend’s avatar?

“I can’t believe we got the clue this easily...” Felicia said, dejectedly. She couldn’t help feeling that all her hard work over the past three months had been a waste of time.

Kirihito (Leader) laughed. “It certainly is a clue, but if you think you can catch King that easily, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“What do you mean?” Ichiro asked.

“King is a lone wolf. He’s never registered a single friend. He’s probably down in the lowest levels of the dungeon, fighting powerful monsters like he does every day. Can you imagine? Being all alone in a dungeon full of powerful enemies that give even the top guilds pause?”

“I see.”

“We’re going to try to find King, too, and gain inspiration from him as his fellow Kirihitos. Later. I pray we’ll meet again!”

“Meet again!” “Meet again!” “Meet again!” “Meet again!” “Meet again!” “Meet again!”

The remaining six Kirihitos imitated their leader in lockstep before leaving.

Ichiro watched The Kirihitters depart the front-line base into the Necrolands, murmuring to himself, “I suppose everyone enjoys the game in their own way.”

“Indeed.” Kirschwasser could sympathize, as someone with his own unique playing style.

Felicia stood there with a gloomy expression on her face.

It was only natural. She had gotten a clue as to Sera Kiryu’s whereabouts so

suddenly, but it had not been what she was expecting at all. No one expected to hear about someone they knew being deified as a legendary solo player. It was difficult to reconcile the image of her truant classmate with the King Kirihito they had talked about.

“We don’t know for certain that they’re one and the same,” Ichiro reminded her, but Felicia only murmured a subdued agreement.

“Even so, a hint is a hint,” Kirschwasser said. “He mentioned something about the lowest levels of the dungeon.”

“Yeah. I wonder which one...”

“If you go straight down the Necrolands’ main street, you’ll reach a dungeon called the Forgotten Catacombs. That’s likely it. Many people have been exploring it, believing it to be a key point in the Grand Quest.” Kirschwasser cast a glance at the three great guilds. “I believe the Knights and the Serpents were making it a point to explore the Catacombs.”

“I see,” Ichiro nodded. Then he looked at Felicia. She was deep in thought about something.

“Anyway, Felicia. Shall we search for King Kirihito?”

“S-Sure...”

At the sight of Felicia’s hesitant agreement, Ichiro smiled gently. “Would you rather not?”

“H-Huh?” Felicia looked up at the unexpected question.

“I’m doing this at your request. If you’re not certain this is what you want, I won’t do it.”

Felicia stood in silence for a few moments, then eventually shook her head. “No, let’s go.”

The others had no idea what decision Felicia had worked out in that short moment of hesitation.

She was surely in disbelief over the story of King Kirihito. Ichiro and Kirschwasser had no idea what Sera Kiryu was like in the real world, but the description of King Kirihito suggested a person surely very different from the one

that Asuha Tsuwabuki knew.

What was the thought process at work, if the two really were one and the same? Felicia's petrification was likely due to feeling lost at sea about that. Such was Ichiro's analysis of his second cousin's state of mind.

"Master Ichiro, it seems in rather poor taste to try to peek into the heart of a girl of such tender years, don't you think?" From beside him, Kirschwasser threw him a chilly glance.

Ichiro laughed. "Nonsense."

"Itchy, you can be nice sometimes."

"I'm always nice, as far as I know."

After working all that out, the three of them signed up for the quest.

"There's been a strange miasma sighted over the Necrolands for the last few days. We found a dungeon at the center of the ruins. Please go there and try to find the cause!"

The GM running reception (a macho bunny-eared Anthromorph) gave them that overbearing instruction as he sent the party on their way.

They had registered for the quest. Without registering, they wouldn't be able to enter the central dungeon, the Forgotten Catacombs. It was an irritating rule.

"Incidentally, it seems participants who die respawn at the ruined temple over there," Ichiro said, pointing. Felicia and Kirschwasser looked at the ruined temple in question.

Players were exiting it with surprising frequency, and with a variety of different expressions. Some looked pale and dejected, while others were smiling awkwardly. But they were uniformly returning either clad in their starter gear or stripped down to their underwear.

"Ugh, you really do lose your equipment when you die..."

"That is the rule, after all. You've never experienced it, Lady Felicia?"

"No. I've only been fighting monsters way lower level than me."

"It is wise to preserve a safety margin." Online games all had different death

penalties. Some lowered your level or experience or caused you to lose all your money. *NaroFan*'s was particularly malicious — the loss of all items you were currently carrying. Players hated it. There had been enough complaints to force them to change certain rare items from "lost" to "dropped."

Still, if an entire party was wiped out, scavengers would show up to loot the dropped items, so in the end it didn't fix much.

"If The Kirihitters get killed on the way down, they'll be reverted back to unremarkable adventurers who happen to have the name Kirihito. I wonder if they'll pay to buy that tie-in armor again."

"They should create some kind of death penalty insurance. Perhaps I'll collect in-game currency from players in advance, and either recompense them for the cost of items lost after death or simply agree to fetch the dropped items from the floors they died on. Wouldn't that be an interesting business? Maybe I'll try it."

"Itchy, please don't do any more weird things."

Ichiro shrugged, but agreed that while death penalty insurance sounded like an interesting idea, it would probably be a lot of trouble to actually run. "Well, then, let's head to the Necrolands. Felicia, are you all right for time?"

"Oh, yeah. Um... we'll probably have dinner around 8:00. They said they'd make it late today."

Felicia opened the menu window and checked the time. It was currently 6:00 PM. She'd come right home after finals and logged in around 2:30, which meant it had been over three hours now. It felt both very long and very short at the same time. A strange feeling.

"I see. Well, I suppose I should go."

"Huh?!" Felicia was shocked by Kirschwasser's statement. "Mr. Kirsch, you're going home?"

"You may have forgotten, Lady Felicia, but I am Sakurako Ogi." The silver-haired Knight spoke in especially sonorous tones. "To neglect dinner preparations to play the game would make me a terrible wage thief. As that is not my desire, I shall log out and begin cooking Master Ichiro's dinner."

“R-Right. That must be hard.”

“Oh, but it is. Ah, Master Ichiro, tonight will be horse mackerel baked with fragrant herbs.”

“Hm, sounds good. I was getting tired of just eating curry lately.”

“Well, then. Good hunting, you two.”

With that, Kirschwasser logged out.

Ichiro and Felicia were left standing together in front of the gate that led out into the Necrolands. Elite players passed through the gate around them, shooting dubious glances their way.

Felicia looked up at Ichiro timidly.

“I-Itchy...”

“Yes?”

“Are we going?”

“We are going,” Ichiro responded with a smile.

“I, um... I’m only level 38.”

“Yes, and I’m level 92.”

“But our tank, Mr. Kirsch, just logged out.”

“True, but I’m still here.”

“I-I don’t have anyone to protect me...”

Ichiro was neither stupid nor foolish. He was Felicia’s beloved Itchy, and he surely understood what she was getting at. Yet his infallible smile did not waver.

“I am rarely one to quote proverbs, but there is one that applies very well right now.”

“Wh-What?”

“The best defense is a good offense.”

“N-No!” Felicia cried out. She was about to run, but Ichiro’s next words were filled with ice.

“Felicia. Earlier, I said that if you were not prepared to go, I would not go. You said you were prepared. That means that I will go, and you will go, too.”

“What if I’m not prepared anymore?!”

“I don’t have a plan for that, so we’ll go anyway. You now have two choices.” Ichiro held two fingers up to Felicia. “I can pick you up and drag you along, or you can stay close to me and walk on your own. I think the second is safer and more advisable. You won’t have to call in the Power Golem until it’s absolutely necessary.”

Ichiro smiled. Felicia knew that smile.

She remembered it from her eleventh birthday. Ichiro had taken her to the amusement park and listened courteously to all of her requests. They had gone on the Ferris wheel, the teacups, and the merry-go-round, just as she wanted to. But she hadn’t been satisfied just having him along. She had said:

“I want to ride what you want to ride, Itchy.”

Ichiro insisted that it was her birthday, and they should ride what she wanted. But she grew obstinate about the feeling that he was treating her like a child.

“In that case...” Ichiro had said, and gleefully picked out his own preferred ride...

Ah, just remembering it was terrifying.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki could be indulgent to a fault, but if that were kicked away, all bets were off. This time was no different.

Felicia gave up. To give up is the end, the saying went. But that was okay. She wanted to get the suffering over with as soon as possible.

I wonder if I’ll die, Felicia thought.

Long ago, Paul McCartney had sung “Live and Let Die.”

It was a song from 26 years before Asuha was born, but for some reason the up-tempo rock track with Paul’s beautiful voice was playing on endless loop in her mind right now. The Dragonet boy ruthlessly and boldly amassed a pile of

corpses as she clung to him, the two of them swiftly proceeding through the main story.

“This isn’t as bad as I expected,” he commented.

“Y-Yeah...”

The majority of the players around them were taking on the Grand Quest in parties of four or five. Watching them effortlessly dispose of the undead-type monsters that popped up incessantly, she realized how much skill it took.

But having leveled up at a terrifying rate using the game’s paid content, Ichiro Tsuwabuki continued his leisurely one-man advance. What was more horrifying was realizing that, because he was using the 24 hour paid boosts every day, he was going to keep on gaining levels.

Ichiro’s class was Magi-Fencer. Its strength was that it allowed the acquisition of both Fighter and Mage-type skills, but most people didn’t have enough skill points to advance both equally. Even if they did, it would be impossible to keep up with specialist builds. The player’s half-hearted skill levels would just be a weight around the necks of their comrades in an MMORPG where role division in party play mattered so much.

Ichiro had more than compensated for that through the use of microtransactions. Every time he leveled up, he got three or four times more skill points than a normal person. He’d quickly outstripped more superficial specialist builds.

“Uooooo...”

“Uoooh... ahhhhh...”

Zombies lurched toward them, letting out eerie moans. Ichiro unleashed a peal of hellfire from his hands that incinerated the walking corpses instantly.

A skeleton knight attempted to ambush him from behind. He blocked it with his bare-handed “Weapon Guard” skill, then punched back as hard as he could with the other hand. The skeleton knight collapsed with a clatter.

This might be the time to explain how the game’s battle system works.

The abilities a player could acquire were broken up into two main categories:

“Skills” and “Arts.” Skills had continuous effects, whereas Arts were used actively.

For example, “Dragon Claw,” which increased Ichiro’s attack power when fighting bare-handed, was a Dragonet-exclusive Skill, while “Punching Technique” and “School of Flame” increased the power of his hand-to-hand attacks and fire magic, respectively.

The fire spell “Spiral Blaze,” which he’d used to roast the zombies, and Weapon Guard, which he used to block the skeleton’s attack, were both Arts. The attack he’d used against the skeleton, “Bash,” was the most basic of basic physical attacks.

Flexibility was the game’s selling point; Skills could be turned on or off at will. As long as the sum total of your skill levels was lower than your total skill slots, you could set a level 50 skill to level 20 if it benefited you.

Ichiro’s strength came from his high number of skill levels, which gave him great freedom in choosing his Skills. He’d also bought the Skill Slot Doubler Bonus, which let him increase his combat prowess even more. This was a pay-to-download bonus that usually only lasted for 12 hours, and was meant to give intermediate players a boost for high-pressure battles.

And thus Ichiro, using the overwhelming abilities he’d gained with the power of money, was easily dominating this dungeon.

Felicia couldn’t say she minded this time.

“I’m glad we’re making such swift progress.”

“Y-Yeah...” Ichiro smiled as he used recovery items to ease the fatigue he’d amassed through constant use of his Arts.

Around them in the dungeon, a number of players with the Acolyte class were using “Saint Barrier” to block off encroaching mobs and healing the wounded within. At the same time, Alchemists and Thieves were offering potions and map information to players about to take on the dungeon in exchange for compensation.

“It appears that strength alone usually isn’t enough to get you to the bottom floors. You need to learn the map, and you need constant healing,” Ichiro

murmured as he watched them. “Of course, a player’s own skill can keep expenditures at bay, I’m sure.”

“And you think you can do that alone, Itchy?”

“Yes. If your friend can do it, I believe I can too. I can get recovery items whenever I want to, after all.”

“Stop using microtransactions for everything!” Felicia screamed, earning looks from all the players around her. Her face was red and scrunched up.

Just then, an avatar broke in to talk to them. “Are you the one who’s trying to solo this dungeon?”

It was a man with a large, muscular body, a hawkish nose, and short red hair whose sideburns joined to his goatee. It was Stroganoff, the leader of the Red Sunset Knights. Like Kirihito (Leader), he seemed to have a large coterie around him, but perhaps that was simply true of all elite MMO players.

“I’m with this girl, so I’m not solo.”

“But it’s pretty much the same thing, ability-wise,” Felicia interjected over Ichiro. She was feeling like a total burden.

“I’ve heard about you. You took out Edward with one punch the other day,” Stroganoff said.

Felicia’s eyes went wide at the sudden talk of violence. What was he talking about? Who was Edward? All kinds of questions began flooding through her mind. Maybe he was a quest boss character?

“I thought he was pretty strong, too,” Stroganoff continued.

“But I’m far stronger than that ‘pretty strong’ Edward.”

“So it seems. But I still believe it the height of hubris to take this dungeon on solo.” There was something a bit antiquated in the way Stroganoff spoke. Perhaps he, like Kirschwasser, enjoyed roleplaying.

His voice was a deep and sonorous one, sampled from a famous voice actor. This was another pay-to-download option the player could purchase during character editing, suggesting Stroganoff was not beyond trend-chasing.

“Regardless of what anyone thinks of me, this is how I’ve always lived my life. Besides, there’s a player who’s already soloing the dungeon, isn’t there?” Ichiro responded.

“King Kirihito, you mean?” Stroganoff let out a sigh. “That man is extraordinary. If you just look at his stats — his level and total Skill and Art levels — they’re nothing that special. But what’s really noteworthy about him is his own talent, and...”

“Stroganoff. Are you suggesting that I am his inferior in this regard?”

“...Ichiro Tsuwabuki,” he said, apparently taking a moment to check the avatar name over his head. “I’m giving you this warning for your own good.”

Ichiro wasn’t a short man by any means, but Stroganoff still towered over him. His calm yet powerful gaze met that of the aloof Dragonet. It was the kind of “strong rivals glare at each other” scene you might see in a movie or an anime. Felicia’s (albeit limited) experience suggested that one of them would eventually get bored, and break the gaze with a “heh.”

“Heh.”

And so it was.

“You do appear quite confident,” Stroganoff said. “As you wish. We’ll see if your skills are enough to carry you through the lowest levels of Delve.”

“That was my intent, with or without your permission.” As Stroganoff turned and lumbered away, the main thought that ran through Felicia’s mind was that she had never heard someone say “as you wish” before. Kirschwasser had told her that Stroganoff ran his own restaurant. There was no way he talked that way in real life.

“Well, Felicia. Let’s get going.”

“Oh, wait, Itchy!’

Ichiro stepped back into the dungeon as if he were strolling about on a picnic. The other players watched him, agog.

“These graphics truly are detailed,” he murmured quietly.

“Itchy, you’ve been saying that this whole time,” Felicia interjected.

“Well, that’s just how I really feel.”

He’d flown all around the world and seen all kinds of ruins with his own eyes. The graphics designer who’d designed this dungeon likely couldn’t say the same. Yet the dungeon’s eerie atmosphere, the feeling of the walls and the floors... they were in no way inferior to the traces of ruined ancient cultures he had seen in real life. The human imagination truly was a powerful thing.

The footsteps of his King Behemoth Leather Shoes resounded against the flagstones in the wide caverns. The paths twisted like a maze (in truth, that was what they had been designed to be), and beginning on this floor, all of a sudden, they became very wide, with high ceilings. It was easy for Ichiro to imagine just why the halls were that way. It was likely a sign that this level would begin to spawn oversize mobs.

But for now, the ones blocking their path were hordes of worthless Greater Zombies, mixed in with the occasional powerful mob that you occasionally saw at the higher levels — Pain Ghosts, Skeleton Reapers, and Giant Zombies. Ichiro’s Dragon Claw flashed, easily slashing through such monsters.

“Uoooooh...”

“Good to see you,” Ichiro said to the Giant Zombie — it would give him a lot of experience, after all — as he unleashed a magic blast on it.

It was Spiral Blaze, the mid-level fire-type attack Art. A whorl of hellfire wreathed his outstretched fist, easily halting the advance of the mass of rotting flesh.

The interminable hordes of zombies were there to tire you out, but there was no sign of fatigue in Ichiro’s expression. This would be a grueling battle for any other player, but that didn’t even occur to him.

“You must be tired of dominating everything all the time, huh, Itchy?” Felicia asked.

“Would you like to fight them, then, Felicia?”

“No, no thank you.”

The dungeon was set up to be a winding mass of corridors, but Ichiro was

keeping a map with the drawing tool, which kept them from getting lost.

After turning the latest group of mobs to ash, they walked a little while, and found...

“Itchy, look!”

“Hmm...”

They were standing in a hall littered with equipment.

These were players’ dropped items.

It wasn’t an uncommon sight: the scattering of equipment items that indicated a party’s complete destruction.

It was, at minimum, the proof that a player had fought mobs in that location and run out of life less than 24 hours ago.

Of course, it was just a game, so while it may have been frustrating, they hadn’t really died, and would have been resurrected in the ruined temple nearby. But there was still something eerie and macabre about the sight of that equipment scattered around, symbols of their owners’ cruel end here in these uncivilized depths.

Ichiro’s expression turned from its usual breezy one to something more serious. He recognized that equipment. Unadorned straight swords and long black coats... Though quite rare, they didn’t offer very good stats bonuses, but there were enough pieces for there to be multiple owners, and they all had the same design with the same emblem textured onto the collar.

“The Kirihitters...”

“Indeed.”

They had suffered the indignity of dying here in this place.

The Kirihito from the story might be the ultimate solo player, but these were just wannabe heroes modeling themselves after him, just another group of players bound by the system’s rules. Their skill was far from “ultimate.” They had been beaten by a stronger opponent, nothing more.

Yet, thinking back on the considerate Kirihito (Leader) they had talked with just

before, Ichiro couldn’t help but feel a scrap of pity. The more he thought about it, the less well it sat with him.

But the most notable point of interest was that there were only four sets of the equipment scattered there. The Kirihitters had seven members in all. Which meant three of them hadn’t died — at least, not in that location.

“Hmmm...”

Even so, they must have been in pretty big trouble if they didn’t even have time to pick up their allies’ equip items. In other words, the three Kirihitos had not avenged their fallen brethren, which meant the remaining half of The Kirihitters might still be on this floor, then.

Ichiro stuck the four sets of tie-in items in his inventory, then looked up and down the wide corridor. He had his infinite supply of potions. If they were still alive, he wouldn’t mind giving some to them.

Just as Ichiro was about to start down the hallway again, he heard the sound of screams echoing through it.

The cries that had previously only been indistinct echoes in the corridor consolidated into a single direction: the hallway right in front of them. Ichiro turned to face the voices and saw three men running down the center of the 30-meter-wide corridor. They were all Kirihitos. Which meant they were alive.

But there was no time now to feel relieved over that; they were being pursued by a swarm of mobs, undead monsters he had never seen before.

The monsters were based on a skeleton archetype that wore a helmet reminiscent of ancient Sparta. They brandished a machete and a shield, but unlike the usual skeleton warriors, their lower halves were a set of wheels made from bone.

Ichiro checked the clattering, creepily smiling skeleton’s maw with his Far Sight skill.

Behind the large dust trail visual it was kicking up were more of the same type; quite a number of them. Probably too many for the three Kirihitos to face. They were far away right now, but it was only a matter of time before they bridged the distance, and the Kirihitos were so distracted with their running that they

hadn’t seen Ichiro and Felicia.

The terrifying train was coming right for them.

The Kirihitters weren’t the only ones panicking.

“I-I-I-Itchy! Itchy!!” Felicia screamed, grabbing the corner of Ichiro’s jacket and tugging hard.

Perhaps an explanation is required: In MMOs, trailing a large number of monsters behind you and luring them into groups of other players — an act known as “training” — is considered very bad manners. Training can be done maliciously, to take out a rival player group. But whether it’s done intentionally or not, it’s always considered rude.

Manners, however, are artificial constructs created out of a sense of mutual social consideration, and Ichiro had no interest in either enforcing or abiding by them. The charging undead monsters also didn’t seem like much of a threat, so rather than be angry or panicked, he simply called out:

“Hey, Kirihito! I’m glad you’re okay!”

“Is this really the time?!” Felicia screamed.

The Kirihito at the head of the train, Kirihito (Leader), only then seemed to notice Ichiro’s presence, and his face went pale. He was trying to stop so as not to make trouble for their party, but at the current distance, it made little difference.

“Mr. Tsuwabuki, I’m sorry! I ended up training you!” he shouted.

“Nonsense. No need for such formality with me,” Ichiro said calmly. With one hand still in his pocket, he raised his right hand. “It was clearly fate for us to meet here. Allow me to assist you.”

That would be easier said than done. An area of effect spell Art would surely catch the Kirihitos, as well. A support Art for focusing magic might be useful at a time like this, but he didn’t have any. There were also no spells that you could bend around a group.

In Ichiro’s opinion, this was one way in which the game was unnecessarily inflexible. Ichiro Tsuwabuki was the rare kind of person for whom games were

often harder than reality, as the real world might be slightly more accommodating.

Ichiro's thoughts strayed to Felicia, who cowered by his side. That was right, he remembered. She was here with him, too.

"Felicia, can you choose the location to which you summon your Power Golem?"

"Y-Yeah... It's pretty flexible that way..."

"In that case..."

Ichiro gave instructions to Felicia.

Felicia nodded seriously, and took out her Dominion Dagger. A mysterious sound filled the narrow, choked passages of the Catacombs.

It was followed immediately afterward by a crunch, and then a huge shadow loomed over them. A steel giant whose height and width far outstripped the hallway's dimensions became a wall blocking off the undead monsters from the Kirihitters.

Two Skeleton Chariots had slipped through, but they would be easy enough to beat, Ichiro thought. But just then...

The first to stop was Kirihito (Leader). With little affect but a great deal of pride, he drew his straight sword and turned to face the charging Skeleton Chariots. He took in a deep breath, then made a great show of holding up his sword. Even Ichiro found himself enchanted by the sight. The Kirihito with a snail shell on his head and the Kirihito with the Detect Googles mirrored his posture.

What are they doing, Ichiro wondered, tilting his head. They didn't need to be so reckless — he could easily handle them himself.

As the Skeleton Chariot squad drew closer, the laughter from the leader of the pack grew even louder. Just turning their attention to it activated its Skeleton Focus, and the rhythmical yet unsettling chattering of bones met his ears.

The three Kirihitos took a simultaneous step forward and drove their swords through the leading Skeleton Chariot. Three four-digit damage effects appeared at once, sending the lead Skeleton Chariot flying.

“Oh?” An unguarded noise of astonishment escaped Ichiro’s lips. Not bad at all.

But they’d only beaten the leader of the monsters. They had no way of defending against the fierce attack of the chariots that would follow, now disarmed and at the mercy of the bony wheels. In real life, the scene that unfolded before them would have been a merciless dance of flying blood and torn flesh.

But all Ichiro saw was a cold, calculating string of battle damage digits. All he could do was pray that their HP gauges didn’t get too low, and then lay waste to the chariots that followed.

He turned to face the chariot coming towards him, striking it with an unflinching counter. It barely registered.

The chariot continued on its trajectory, slashing away as it passed. Fortunately, Felicia wasn’t hit by the attack. The Skeleton Chariot continued to race down the hallway past them. It would be a while before it hit the far wall and U-turned back at them.

“Kirihito, that was a magnificent attack you used. What was it called?” Ichiro commented.

“Oh, uh, that?” Kirihito (Leader) asked as he moved unsteadily to his feet. He had a few HP remaining, but his status was definitely critical.

Ichiro pulled a few potions out of his inventory and distributed them to the group.

“Thank you. That was ‘Breaker.’ Tie-in weapons tend to have a high Durability, even if their power is low. Since we were going to die and drop them anyway, we decided to sacrifice them to avenge our comrades.”

“Hmmm.” Ichiro leisurely opened the browser window and looked up the guide wiki.

Breaker was a weapon attack Art that any class could buy as long as they had a high enough strength stat. It came with a high fatigue rate, but it dealt a damage bonus based on the Art’s level and the weapon’s remaining Durability. The weapon used would have its Durability reduced to zero and be destroyed.

“I never knew about that Art.”

“It’s not very practical. It’s basically a last-ditch attack. What do you want to do, Mr. Tsuwabuki? We’re the ones who led the train onto you, so if you want to run away...” Kirihito (Leader) began, but trailed off. “M-Mr. Tsuwabuki?”

“Nonsense. I’ve never run away from anything, and I don’t intend to start now.”

Ichiro closed the browser and selected “Config” in his menu window. Once the motion was finished, a sword appeared in his hand. Kirihito (Leader) recognized it immediately.

It was the Legendary Blade Arondight, a pay-to-download tie-in item from a popular manga. It was considered a low-tier weapon because the attack bonus it provided was mediocre compared to the strength stat required to wield it. People gave it the mocking name “Monetary Blade Arondight,” but it had the highest Durability of any tie-in item in the game.

The Skeleton Chariot squad had finished their turn and were charging back in their direction. Ichiro used his stockpile of points to learn the new Art. Felicia grabbed Ichiro’s sleeve and spoke in an urgent whisper.

“U-Um, Itchy... don’t tell me, you’re...”

“Oh, yes, I am.” Ichiro raised his Arondight high.

Felicia screamed.

In that moment, the three Kirihitos realized the tragedy they had wrought.

The Monetary — er, Legendary — Blade cost 1,200 yen to purchase. Rather expensive, relative to its abilities.

The advancing Skeleton Chariot was merely a fictional threat. The sight unfolding before Kirihito (Leader)’s eyes was far more terrifying. Judging by their relative velocity, the chariots would soon be in range. Ichiro took a step forward.

He took a quiet breath of preparation...

“Noooooooooo!”

...but it was drowned out by Felicia’s scream.

The weapon attack Art, Breaker. Its high Durability would more than cover for its relatively low power. Combined with his damage-increasing skill buffs like Sword Technique and Strong Blade, plus his straightforward (and swiftly increased) strength stat, it provided a final damage calculation that revealed a 5-digit damage marker over the head of the skeleton chariot.

And so the pale rider of this fictional world, which came slinging fear and death, was taken out by the 1,200 yen Monetary Sword.

In the grand scheme of the money a man makes in his lifetime, 1,200 yen may not seem like much. But consider...

Kirihito (Leader) trembled. That one sword had cost as much as two of the light novels that were so sacred to him.

And the bad news wasn't over yet.

The Power Golem sealing the hallway was slowly having its life chipped away. No matter how specialized it was for endurance, Felicia was still just a level 38 Beast Tamer. Her servant golem couldn't be counted on to hold out for too long.

Even so, Felicia was extremely hesitant to call back the Power Golem. "U-Um, Itchy..."

"Go ahead, Felicia. I want the way opened." Ichiro was already holding a second and third Arondight in his hands.

The "legend" came cheap.

"Mr. Tsuwabuki, this isn't right..."

"Nonsense." Ichiro slapped down Kirihito (Leader)'s gravely earnest warning.

"Please, Mr. Tsuwabuki! Money shouldn't be used so recklessly!"

"He's right! Itchy, you need to treat money as a precious commodity!"

"But if this keeps up, Felicia, your Power Golem..."

A scream like the scraping of metal upon metal echoed through the thin passageway. Beyond it, the horde of undead monsters swarmed, dishing out constant damage. If the Power Golem were vanquished, the train of monsters would pour through like an avalanche.

He could clear them out in no time with his Monetary Blades, but not without them. Wide-area attack magic could fry them all at once, but the passageway was too narrow, and fighting them bare-handed would take time, with no guarantee that the Kirihitters and Felicia would stay safe in the meantime.

“Leader, there’s still a Zombie Legion on this floor.”

“R-Right! There’s one of those, too! That’s why we should run away!” Kirihito (Leader) spoke very earnestly on advisement from his comrade. Ichiro looked upwards.

“Zombie Legion?”

“It’s a rare mob type that spawns in the Necrolands. Extremely powerful. Not many people have encountered them, though, so they haven’t been investigated that deeply. It appears that starting on this floor, they appear in groups with those Skeleton Chariots,” Kirihito (Leader) explained.

It was enormous, and emitted a foul odor from its body. An undead monster forged of pure distillate of its designer’s malice. Even looking at it inspired revulsion. To come upon something like that in the endless labyrinth would cause any player to forget that it was just a game and fly into a panic. Most people simply broke rank and ran, leading to just this situation.

The Zombie Legion itself moved slowly, so it wasn’t hard to get out of its aggro radius, but the Skeleton Chariots that accompanied it made it far more difficult to escape. The Zombie Legion’s size inspired terror in the player, and the moment they turned away, the chariots would burst out and attack from behind, their wheels quickly grinding down a player’s HP.

If they stood to face it, it would end much the same. A Skeleton Chariot’s AI algorithms inspired them to pursue tenaciously no matter how far the player ran, which tended to result in trains. The phenomenon had likely wiped out many parties before them. They’d managed to avoid that this time, but as they ran, they had noticed many equip items already scattered around them.

“I see,” Ichiro murmured.

By this time, the cries of the Power Golem had ceased. Its master, Felicia, seemed to realize this first, and she peeked over in fear. In this game, when a

character’s life reached zero, its sprite dissolved into particles of light. If the golem was still there, it must still have HP remaining.

“Wh-What’s going on?” Kirihito (Leader) finally noticed the abnormality, and spoke up in a trembling voice.

“Felicia, remove the Power Golem.”

“U-Um... But...”

“If the same monsters come from the other direction, we won’t be able to run away.” Not even Ichiro knew exactly what was about to happen. It was clear that the attacks against the Power Golem had ceased, but surely, the enemies couldn’t have simply withdrawn...

Felicia vacillated for a moment, then used her Dominion Dagger to encourage the Power Golem to leave. It let out a cry like metal grinding against metal and slowly disappeared.

The party prepared. Anything might happen, and if that “anything” was a mauling by Skeleton Chariots, they would just have to deal with that.

But what they found there was not a mass of enemies.

It was a single man.

He was of modest height, wore a body-length black coat, and carried a sword in one hand. Despite his somewhat reedy build, he stood with absolute presence, as if the chilled air of the labyrinth itself was at his command. The equipment he wore resembled that of the three men standing beside Ichiro and Felicia. The only difference was that he was alone.

Yes... he was alone.

“King Kirihito...” Kirihito (Leader) murmured, voice trembling.

The sight of the intruder had rendered him awestruck. After all, the only proof of his existence had been an account registered with the Thistle Corporation and a few uncertain rumors of his deeds. He did not appear on anyone’s friends lists, and only a few of the top players had ever chanced to see him. He was a myth of the cyber world, and he was standing before them now.

Avatar name: Kirihito.

King Kirihito was a joke name someone had come up with, and it had stuck. No one knew if he was aware of the title, but the majesty he projected as he stood there in silence was certainly king-like.

The myth made real. The legendary game champ. The world's best solo player. Tales of his deeds had been proclaimed fantasy even in the heightened reality of the internet — even, they said, if he really did exist.

Something — it looked like bones — was littered around his feet. Drop items from the Skeleton Chariots, no doubt. The man they called King Kirihito paid them no mind and simply stood there, sword in hand.

Ichiro looked at Felicia. She was staring at the man intently, as if sizing him up.

At last, King Kirihito turned to look at them.

"Ah, sorry." Surprisingly, his first words were an apology. "I brought two of them with me."

What could he be talking about, the group thought in unison as they peered down the hallway past him. Then they realized.

"Z-Zombie Legions..." Kirihito (Leader)'s voice was thin with despair.

A sign of the end times. A blasphemy upon all that was sacred. The mountain of bodies creaked under its own weight as it strode through the wide corridors, inspiring trembling, goosebumps, and nausea that went far beyond its Stench of Stagnant Rot. This was corruption incarnate.

Kirihito (Leader) had described the monstrosity of the Zombie Legion just minutes ago. And now there were two of them walking slowly out of the depths of the corridor, striding towards the group. Even Felicia, whose attention had been focused on King Kirihito, stiffened at their appalling visage, a sight so grotesque that it couldn't be laughed off as "only a game."

It was odious from head to toe, and it was all she could do to resist the feeling of loathing welling up inside her, to keep the scream from rising past her throat.

"Huh, so that's a Zombie Legion?" The abrupt words carried a tone of wonder, as one spotting a serow while mountain climbing.

It was Ichiro Tsuwabuki, his usual cool completely unfazed. He remained there with one hand in his pocket, having done nothing to change his posture. "Hey, Kirihito. Let me begin with a thank you. You're the one who cleared up those Skeleton Chariots, aren't you?"

“Yeah, that was me,” King Kirihito said, standing over the bones that littered the floor.

“I see. Then it seems it’s my turn to help you.”

“You, old man?”

“Yes.” Ichiro slowly walked forward, his Monetary Blade in hand, to stand beside King Kirihito.

“Hmm.” The Zombie Legions moved slowly enough that King Kirihito had time to take Ichiro’s measure.

Even to a heavy user like him, the man’s equipment was unfamiliar. The black formal wear that covered him from head to toe seemed more appropriate to a formal ball than a combat situation. He quickly gave up on analyzing him and snapped his attention back to the enemy.

“Well, all right. But if you die, don’t blame me.”

“You may not be aware of this, but I don’t die,” Ichiro laughed in response to King Kirihito’s quip.

Kirihito readied his sword. It was an unadorned straight sword, but it was different, too, from the tie-in weapons mass-produced for players of the same name on the surface. This was an instrument of battle, casting aside physical grace in the name of simple functionality. The dull gleam of the blade was like the consciousness of the fighter itself, designed only for combat.

The underground maze shook. The air, with its faint odor of mold, chilled them to their core. The miraculous merger of human and program had created a sense of tension stretched as taut as a piano wire.

Kirihito dashed across the floor.

Not even an agility stat raised to the maximum could produce initial velocity like that. He was a human bullet, hacking into the Zombie Legion’s body with the speed of a whirlwind.

Despite his straightforward attack, the sluggish Zombie Legion couldn’t keep up. He was a tornado. He was lightning. He hurled himself into striking distance faster than the speed of sound, dug his sword in and pried it out.

Bodies began to fall.

His sword flashed three times, sending gobs of flesh flying before he arrived on the other side. He then turned, his boots ringing out on the floor, and slashed into it again, mercilessly, from behind.

“Uooooooo... ooooo...” the monster’s soul-chilling cry filled the air.

But the assault wasn’t over.

He dashed across the floor in a renewed charge. The speed of his strikes belied their power as he hit it with three consecutive blows. There was a damage visual of a spray of blood, and a giant arm made of piled-up corpses swung down at Kirihito like a pendulum.

He didn’t dodge, but simply met the assaulting ball of corpses head-on, using sheer swordsmanship to cut more flesh away from it.

Ichiro stood a ways away, watching.

The way Kirihito kept moving, cutting away at the Zombie Legion’s flesh before its attacks could land... The simultaneous lightness of his body and heaviness of his slashes were what made the feat possible. It was a stark yet utterly efficient series of blows, so magnificent that even Ichiro was left in awe.

But what was really surprising, even from this distance, were the Arts he was using. Judging by his actions and the flashy damage visuals, it was easy to imagine that he was using multiple Skills. But the only sword technique he employed was the basic attack for physical-oriented classes, Bash.

Because Bash was a basic technique, it could be invoked from multiple stances, and there were a large number of patterns and effects attached to those various stances. As a result, the cooldown time between moves was very short. Despite being a basic technique, a high enough Art level could make it a potent source of damage, and it was an excellent link move, as well. Many high-level combatants composed powerful combos using Bash.

But to take out a Zombie Legion with Bash alone... that was truly astonishing.

The use of “Reduce Cooldown” combined with Bash completely negated the cooldown extension generated by Stench of Stagnant Rot, which made it the

right choice of Art. Still, the blows were more powerful than a mindless hammering of Bash would suggest. It was enough to cause a stun effect, which invoked when a certain amount of damage was caused, and as a result, Kirihito was able to unleash a never-ending string of attacks on the Zombie Legion.

As if it were just a single Art, he unleashed a long flurry of moves, followed by a pause. Controlling even the flow of the air itself, he changed his grip on his sword, then cut up with a diagonal slash.

Having taken remarkable damage, the Zombie Legion's giant body began to fall. The dumbfounded trio of Kirihitos, on the verge of being crushed, disappeared in a flurry of effect visuals.

So this was King Kirihito, the ultimate solo player.

There were few people in this world so gifted. His lightning reflex speed almost made it seem like his mind was directly connected to the Miraive Gear.

"Well?" After his swift extermination of the Zombie Legion, King Kirihito turned to Ichiro. "Weren't you going to help me?"

"Oh, that's right. I'll finish the other, then. And just so you know, I am 23 years old. You can determine for yourself whether that qualifies as 'old.'"

"That's pretty old."

"Good. If you think that, that's all that matters." Ichiro had gotten a clear sense of King Kirihito's ability, but now it was his turn to show off his own skill. It was a compulsion he couldn't fully explain.

No, actually, he could explain it... The corners of his mouth turned upwards as the feeling began to sprout in his heart.

This wasn't an enemy that could be subdued with Breaker alone. Ichiro equipped an attack spell on his open hand, then ran along the floor at the Zombie Legion.

He led with Breaker, hitting the monster for 1,200 yen worth of damage.

Feeling the increased cooldown time inflicted by Stench of Stagnant Rot, he followed up with the high-powered fire spell "Sword of Surt." The flame's power, augmented by "Ground Zero Magic," incinerated a large mass of zombie

corpses.

The wide passageway was quickly becoming an oven. The Kirihitters and Felicia watched, faces red from the heat.

Ichiro took decisive action with “Strash,” using his bare fist against the Zombie Legion, which was already wreathed in flames and writhing in pain. While forcibly accelerating his cooldown time with “Cast Break,” he fired off a second Sword of Surt. In addition, he employed “Shining Fingers,” which increased the damage dealt by magic attacks. He continued his ceaseless attacks, ignoring his mounting fatigue, and eventually pushed the Zombie Legion to break down and expire.

Behind him, King Kirihito whistled.

“Old man, are you a whale?” he asked, his words containing no trace of praise or gratitude.

“I am.”

“When did you start playing?”

“The beginning of the month. Can I assume from your question that you prefer not to pay for content?”

“...Yeah, I don’t. I can barely afford the base monthly fee.” There were barbs behind Kirihito’s words and hostility in his eyes as he looked the immaculately dressed Ichiro up and down. Despite his attempts to project an air of disinterest, in the end, he couldn’t hide it.

“Let me see if I can guess what you’re thinking.” Ichiro held up one hand at shoulder height, the other thrust into his pocket.

“Please don’t.”

“Since this service began operation, you’ve been using every waking moment between classes to drive yourself further into this world. You’ve reached the status of legend as the ultimate solo player, and even the elite players consider you something of a myth. You did this all without spending a cent, and you’re proud of that.”

Kirihito said nothing. He glared back at Ichiro, not even trying to hide his

hostility now.

“Then, today, you met me. I’ve been playing *Narrow Fantasy Online* for a mere week. You see a person approaching your level through repeated microtransactions, and you feel slightly threatened. That’s more or less the situation, correct? Or perhaps it’s just my imagination.”

Kirihito didn’t respond, but the emotion in his gaze seemed to affirm Ichiro’s theory.

Ichiro shrugged with just the one arm. “The truth is, I’m the same way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought I was the strongest and most impressive, but it’s possible you may be just a bit stronger than I am. I simply can’t take it. Ah, but don’t tell anyone. I’m swallowing my pride to make this confession,” Ichiro added quickly.

The truth was, he hadn’t intended to say any of this.

King Kirihito could be Sera Kiryu’s avatar, Felicia’s friend. But Ichiro hadn’t even looked at Felicia during this time. King Kirihito had all of his attention.

He had found something simmering beneath Kirihito’s icy surface, and once he’d realized it was the same thing that was sleeping inside him, he could no longer stop himself. Their eyes remained locked: Ichiro’s face smiling, King Kirihito’s scowling.

There was a quiet passion in Ichiro’s smile. He had always possessed a natural confidence, a conceit, that he was the best at anything. Behind it was the need to always maintain superiority, even on someone else’s home ground. That need was the source of his cold smile.

Their gazes crossed. There was a tension in the air even greater than that inspired by the battle with the Zombie Legions. A tension as fragile as finely-spun glass.

There was a fire in their hearts, the first burning embers of a need to fight. For the sake of both of their prides, they would be willing to settle things here and now, even if it left one of those prides broken.

Such a feeling could not be contained for long. It was only a matter of time

before it exploded...

Or so they thought.

“A-Amazing!” An awed voice broke through the sparks flying between the two.

It was Kirihito (Leader), interposing himself as thoroughly as if he’d drawn the sword on his hip and cut it between the two men. His eyes shone boyishly.

“Amazing... You’re amazing, King Kirihito! You really are the real thing!”

The other Kirihito looked taken aback. “Um... King Kirihito? You mean me?”

“You didn’t know? It’s what pretty much everyone calls you.”

“So lame...” King Kirihito didn’t seem to like the nickname.

“Kirihito? ...No, not you. I mean Leader Kirihito. It’s true that King was amazing, but was I not also amazing?” Ichiro asked.

“You’re pretty amazing, Mr. Tsuwabuki. But King is *so* amazing!”

“...Well, I suppose you’re entitled to your opinion.” In addition to the bitterness of nearly breaking his own rules, a note of dissatisfaction floated up in Ichiro’s voice.

The realization they wouldn’t be able to cross blades just yet filled Ichiro with a simultaneous sense of relief and disappointment. King Kirihito was looking like he felt cut off at the knees, as well.

With a somewhat deflated expression, Ichiro pulled a fatigue recovery potion out of his inventory and tossed it in King’s direction.

“Anyway, you can have this. I know you don’t like virtual goods, but think of it as a show of goodwill from me to you.”

“Thanks. And I don’t dislike virtual goods. I think I just don’t like you.”

“I hear that quite often,” Ichiro said with a wry smile. He then cast a glance at Felicia, who had been silent the whole time.

Her expression was severe. Ichiro never knew that Felicia’s — or Asuha Tsuwabuki’s — face could make such an expression. It greatly resembled anger. She had been glaring at King Kirihito from a slight distance away, but then strode up to him, suddenly and forcefully.

The word “uh-oh” — not usually a part of Ichiro’s vocabulary — entered his mind in that moment.

“As a matter of fact, old man, that Tsuwabuki name of yours—” King’s attempt to speak as he picked up the recovery potion was interrupted as Felicia slapped him across the face.

A small “1” damage visual appeared over King’s head.

“You’re Kiryu, aren’t you?” she asked sharply.

King Kirihito’s eyes opened wide as he stared at her dumbfounded, one hand on his cheek. The slap likely hadn’t hurt — even if it had, the damage done was very slight — yet King acted as though there was a lingering sting. He spoke up hoarsely.

“Tsuwabuki?”

“I was worried about you! What were you thinking?” Felicia’s voice was trembling. “Do you think all this posing and roleplaying makes you cool? Is that why you retreated into the game?”

“Hey, now.” Ichiro clamped a hand over Felicia’s mouth. “As Sakurako-san says, people do have sensitive areas that should not be touched upon...”

“Mmmgh!”

King had done nothing but stare blankly after having his cheek struck, but now he clicked his tongue and glared at Felicia. “I knew you wouldn’t understand, Tsuwabuki.”

“You...!” she cried.

The words from King — rather, Sera Kiryu — sounded like provocation, but there was a sense of self-recrimination in them, as well. “That’s fine. It’s good for you to be this way, Tsuwabuki. It’s one of the things I like about you. But...” He took in a breath, looking at Felicia with a complicated mix of emotions.

“But you didn’t have to come all the way into my world just to criticize me!”

With that, King ran off, coat fluttering behind him.

His incredible agility stat made it unlikely that any of the players currently

present could catch up with him. As the footsteps faded into silence in the dim light of the dungeon hall, Kirihito (Leader) spoke up gravely.

“Miss Felicia, that wasn’t nice.”

“Oh, come on! I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true!” Felicia snapped back at him. “This whole thing is just escapism! You think so too, right, Itchy?”

“I’m not so sure,” he answered, sounding more cautious than he’d really intended. “That may be true, or it may not. Let’s return to the surface. If we don’t log out soon, we’re going to miss dinner.”

“Oh, come on...” Felicia murmured with dissatisfaction, her last words before they left the Forgotten Catacombs.

3 - Noble Son, Participate

Asuha Tsuwabuki was a 14-year-old girl attending a middle school in Nagoya.

She didn't yet know what she wanted to be when she grew up. But she had a particular memory.

It took place during spring of the year she was to advance from her fourth year to her fifth in elementary school. She was the outdoorsy type, but she was also quite sensitive to the trends around school, and the big fad at the time was the new game where you caught monsters in balls and had them battle. Asuha enjoyed that game quite a lot.

But there are some less-than-mature adults in the world, and one day, when Asuha went to her friend's house to play, her friend's big brother challenged her to a battle. It was partly her own fault for bragging (half exaggerating) about how strong and great her monsters were, but that immature older man employed cheap tricks to render her helpless, and crushed all of Asuha's precious monsters.

Her friend had apologized fervently, and she'd laughed it off, but on the way home her cheer turned to quiet seething. One of her core beliefs was that when you were frustrated, you should do something about it that same day. And she loved stuffed animals, so on the way home, she decided to stop by a 500 yen shop to buy one to calm down. When it turned out they were sold out, she sank further into depression.

Shortly after, she had happened to pass by an arcade, and noticed that one of the claw machines was full of stuffed monsters from the game she liked. Asuha found a stuffed animal of the monster the older boy had beaten, the one she'd chosen to be her starter partner. To say that she wanted it would not be quite accurate. It was more that she felt she had to save it.

It was a sad little bit of projection, but Asuha felt it sincerely. She had convinced herself that to rescue the stuffed animal from the claw machine would be saving her beaten partner in her 3DS.

She had 500 yen on her. The game cost 100 yen to play, but would give you six plays for 500 yen. She'd just have to try.

Asuha was just in the process of screwing up her courage when she heard a voice from behind her.

"Better not," the voice said. She turned, wondering who it might be.

It was a child she'd never seen before, dressed in a neat shirt and shorts combo that was well-suited to a lanky frame, a wad of what was probably bubble gum in one cheek.

"It's in a place you can't get to with only six tries. You'd be wasting your money."

"That's an awful thing to say!" Asuha protested fiercely. She knew that he — or she, now that she thought about it — was clearly right, but her heart could not accept it.

The child looked back at Asuha with a gaze that screamed, "You're a real handful, you know?" but seemed curious as to the tragedy that had led to such a ridiculous protest.

"You like it?" the child asked, meaning the game.

Asuha nodded.

She liked it. She loved it. That was why she was so frustrated.

"Give it here," the child said.

She didn't understand, at first, what the child meant.

"The 500 yen. I'll get it for you."

"Can you do that?" she asked in a trembling voice.

The child cracked up laughing. "I'll do better than you, at least."

It was a frankness that was, in a way, very cool.

In the end, the child failed to get the stuffed animal in six plays, added another 300 yen, and failed again. It was only after the child's mother arrived — getting the stuffed animal on her first 100 yen — that Asuha finally received her toy. It was a rather pitiful showing, but Asuha thanked them both sincerely.

“Tell me the party you lost with,” the child asked as Asuha was getting ready to go.

Asuha explained in great detail all about where she had caught the monsters, her emotional attachment to them, and what moves she had given them. After finally expressing all of her frustration at losing, she felt satisfied and comfortable.

Then, just before she left, Asuha asked whether the child was a boy or a girl. The response was given with a firm scowl.

A week later, Asuha had met up with her friend again, and learned that the brother who had beaten her had himself been beaten badly by a party exactly like Asuha’s. It was another week after that that Asuha had learned that the person using that party was the child who had helped her get the stuffed animal before.

The child’s name was Sera Kiryu.

She had never forgotten Sera’s reaction when she declared it “a very cute name.”

Morning came.

Sakurako Ogi, servant to Ichiro Tsuwabuki, had woken up early as always, in her room full of figures, manga, and DVDs. As usual, the first thing she did was cast open the curtains.

Her master had generously given her a room facing to the east, and she took a deep breath as she bathed in the morning sun. She was glad that it was summer and that the sun was out early. If it had been the middle of winter, it would have been dark outside even with the curtains open, which would have made it hard to get enthused about much of anything.

The next thing she did was take off her pajamas and run to her attached shower room. The water temperature was always 25 degrees Celsius. The cold water droplets hit her head and soaked into her chestnut hair, gradually waking her up. She washed off the sweat from sleeping, dried off, brushed her hair and teeth, put on her clothes and makeup, and did various other appearance checks.

Once it was all ready, she attached her lace cap, completing the routine. For the irrepressible maid Sakurako Ogi, it was the beginning of a new day.

She walked around the room, stretching out her arms and twisting her back. Today, she had to prepare breakfast, do the laundry, and clean Ichiro's Japanese-style room. It was going to be a busy morning, so she quickly headed down the corridor to the dining room to set up her plan for the day.

But...

"Morning, Sakurako-san."

"Good morni... huh?"

Ichiro was there.

It wasn't his being there that was odd, of course; it was his house, after all. It wasn't that he was up early, either; he typically woke up early. Nor was it that he was in the dining room; normally he'd be in the indoor pool or his study at this time of day, but how he used his time was up to him.

But why on Earth was he holding a vacuum?

"I heard something interesting would be happening in the game today, so I thought I might assist you so that we could log in sooner," he said.

As usual, he had the strangest ways of being considerate.

"You can't help me with work I'm getting paid for," she protested. "I'll do the cleaning."

Nevertheless, the young heir continued moving the vacuum, his expression cool. "Sakurako-san, I hope you're not worried that it will diminish your worth if I'm able to do all the cleaning and laundry perfectly."

"Ngh." Sakurako was usually considered a very warm person, but this struck a nerve. "Ichiro-sama, even if you are an unparalleled genius, you cannot compete with me in housekeeping skills."

"Why don't we put that claim to the test?" he asked.

"Oh? I see you haven't lost your mouth, Ichiro-sama."

"It's the same one I've always had. Why don't we say that the winner will do a

favor for the loser?”

“Very well. So be it.”

Sakurako grinned her assent, and the competition began.

“I’ll start with the laundry,” Ichiro attempted.

“No, I’ll do that,” Sakurako broke in, stopping him before he could flaunt an even greater lack of delicacy than usual.

And so the morning passed. The show of tremendous immaturity between the two of them got a day’s work of housework done by a little after 8 AM. As for who won the contest... we’ll leave that to the reader to imagine.

Breakfast ended up starting a bit late, and the two cooked and ate together while praising each other on the fight.

“Ichiro-sama, I never knew you were so competitive,” Sakurako murmured as she spread butter on the brown rice bread. With everything that had happened, breakfast had ended up being a simple affair.

“Hmm, I’ll acknowledge that I am. I always feel I must win at all costs.”

“Is that why you also picked a fight with King Kirihito... I mean, Sera Kiryu?”

“Nonsense. We merely came to an agreement about our mutual need for competition. It was not a fight.”

He was splitting hairs, of course.

He had explained the events of the game to her over dinner the night before. Sakurako had been surprised that they’d found King Kirihito so easily, surprised that he’d taken a Zombie Legion out that quickly, surprised that Ichiro had accomplished the same feat, and surprised that Felicia had slapped him.

She was not at all surprised that he had broken the 1,200 yen Monetary Sword. That barely qualified as news.

She also wasn’t terribly surprised that Ichiro had picked a fight with King. That fit her ongoing theory.

“When did you realize it might happen?” Ichiro asked.

“When Kirihito (Leader) was first telling us about King Kirihito,” Sakurako said, holding up her spoon triumphantly. “You were acting strangely, so I thought, ‘Ah, I bet he’s feeling competitive.’”

She truly was an observant girl. Her inference was right on the money.

“Though I can’t help but find it a bit immature to nurse a rivalry with a middle schooler,” she added.

“Nonsense. A worthy rival is a worthy rival, even if they’re only *ten* years old,” Ichiro argued as he stabbed a fork into his salad smothered in dressing.

“Even if you’re using money to win?” she responded.

“My money is but an extension of my genius,” he said loftily.

It was the money he earned via his genius; thus, it was a part of that genius, and using it in the game was not cheating in any way.

It wasn’t that she didn’t understand what he meant, but it still felt like cheating to her. Perhaps she was too Japanese when it came to money.

“But it must be so hard on Asuha,” Sakurako said, changing the subject to stop her mind from going too far down that path.

Ichiro nodded in agreement.

Asuha had been convinced that Sera Kiryu was escaping into the game world, and realizing that her friend was definitely King Kirihito seemed to make that an inescapable conclusion. A child had stopped coming to school due to being bullied in the real world, and now reigned over the game world as its ultimate player. Viewed objectively, what else could it be?

Asuha must have found it unforgivable.

It was likely that she had initially intended to say something more sympathetic. “Let’s go to school together,” perhaps. Maybe “I’m on your side.” She had probably intended to offer words of encouragement, to draw her friend free of the world of the game.

But the sight of the Kirihitters flocking around, praising “King Kirihito” to the skies, had set her off. It wasn’t wrong for them to have done so, exactly. The timing was just bad. To Felicia, it had likely seemed that King was basking in the

adulation. Perhaps, Ichiro thought, he had been slightly in the wrong with his behavior, as well.

“Well, I think we should let Asuha do whatever she wants to do.” Ichiro said, gathering up the dishes. “And I’ll do what I want to do.”

“You’re going to go after Sera and try to fight her?” Sakurako asked.

“I’m not sure if Sera’s a him or a her, but yes, that’s the plan.”

“Huh? She’s a her, right?”

“I believe he’s a him.”

Realizing that they had come upon a slight misunderstanding, they stared at each other in silence for a few seconds.

“Well, never mind that,” Ichiro said, immediately.

Sakurako had noticed a slight change in Ichiro’s behavior since he had first begun playing a week ago. He was looking bored a lot less often than he used to.

He was actually looking forward to *Narrow Fantasy Online*. It seemed to have far outstripped his expectations. Looking back over the week’s events, that seemed clearly the case, and the incident with King Kirihito just confirmed it.

Ichiro himself had said that everyone enjoyed the game in their own way, and he was clearly figuring out his own unique playstyle. He had found something he never imagined he would: a friendly rival worthy of his skills. Perhaps what her master had wanted for so very long was just something to alleviate his boredom.

She couldn’t escape the nagging thought that this was a supervillain’s motivation, but that was only natural. Ichiro was certainly the “mastermind” type.

“Anyway, the initial agreement I made with Asuha was only that we would help her until she found Sera Kiryu,” Ichiro said.

“I’m not sure that’s a reason to immediately declare her friend your rival on the spot... but ah, well.” Sakurako broke off suddenly as if remembering something. “By the way, what was the interesting thing you mentioned before?”

“Hmm?”

“The thing going on inside the game.”

“Oh, I’ll tell you after we log in.”

Sakurako finished her meal, and the two put their hands together to offer thanks.

“Ah, Ichiro-sama, you really should let me handle the dishes, at least.”

“Please do, then.”

Ichiro moved to the living room to enjoy his post-meal downtime, and around 9:30, with plenty of time to spare, they were both in their Miraive Gear Cocoon seats.

They got into their Miraive Gear Cocoon seats at 9:30 and logged in with plenty of time to spare, arriving right at the frontline base in the Necrolands.

There was a large crowd of people for so early in the morning, in part because it was a Saturday. Felicia was one of them.

She averted her eyes awkwardly at first as she noticed Ichiro and Kirschwasser, but then approached them. “I’m sorry about yesterday,” she said.

“There’s no need to apologize,” Ichiro answered. “In my opinion, there was nothing incorrect about what you did.”

He had a bad habit of saying what he really felt in a very roundabout way, but Felicia just smiled, seeming to be relieved that he wasn’t angry.

“Incidentally, I see there are quite a lot of people here,” Kirschwasser said, gazing over the large crowd of players around them.

There certainly were a lot of them, and they weren’t just standing there. They all seemed to be buzzing excitedly about one single subject.

Felicia and Kirschwasser both looked around, trying to figure out what was going on.

“Do you remember the dungeon we visited yesterday? It seems a player made it to the bottom floor.” Ichiro selected “Config” from his menu window, then called up the Miraive Gear’s proprietary browser. It was an app that let you view web pages at any time while in a game, and it was so convenient that most

players installed it despite the 300 yen monthly usage fee.

“Wow...” Felicia said.

“Oh-ho!” Kirschwasser cried.

Their reactions were the polar opposites of each other.

“Might I ask who it was that made it to the bottom?” Kirschwasser asked.

“Matsunaga, the man who runs this blog,” Ichiro said. His browser was opened to an affiliate site, “vsoku@VRMMO Aggregate Blog.”

“Ah, from the *Dual Serpents,*” Kirschwasser said. “His guild specializes in speed dungeon-diving, so that stands to reason.”

Matsunaga was one of the people Kirschwasser had spoken of so proudly the day before. Ichiro remembered him as an Elf dressed in a green coat who comported himself very elegantly.

“But that doesn’t mean the Grand Quest is finished, does it?” Felicia asked.

“It seems not,” Ichiro responded, after checking his status window to confirm that the special icon marking their participation in the Grand Quest was still there. He then switched back to the web browser and continued. “It appears that reaching the dungeon’s bottom floor is not the win condition. Matsunaga says there are quite a few triggers required to complete the quest, and he wants players from various other guilds to work together to achieve it.”

Ichiro went on to explain that there was a stone monument on the last floor containing information on the Grand Quest’s boss, a.k.a. the Grand Boss. Several spellcaster-class characters would be needed to set off the monument and the triggers around it, which meant that Matsunaga’s party alone wouldn’t be enough.

One thing he knew for sure was that activating the monument in the dungeon would cause the Grand Boss to appear on the surface. Since Matsunaga’s guild couldn’t trigger that alone, he was proposing the formation of a “United Guild” with other top players.

“Master Ichiro, you know an awful lot about this,” Kirschwasser said.

“As a matter of fact, I received an invitation as well,” Ichiro said offhandedly,

opening up his messaging box. The newest message showed the name “Matsunaga” along with an account ID in the “sender” column. It was an invitation to join the United Guild, and to attend a strategy conference regarding it. “This is the ‘something interesting’ I mentioned to you this morning. I found the message on my tablet computer when I woke up.”

Felicia tilted her head in confusion. “I-Itchy, are you... famous here?”

“Are you satisfied?” Kirschwasser asked, expression blank.

Ichiro was struck by a feeling of déjà vu. The silver-haired Knight had looked at him in the exact same way when he’d described his microtransaction-based playstyle.

“But Itchy, haven’t you only been playing the game for a week?” Felicia asked.

“Much has happened in that week,” Kirschwasser said, gravely.

Felicia knitted her brow.

It was true that shortly before he’d met up with Felicia in the game, Ichiro had been the center of some controversy. She may have guessed that by this point, and Ichiro saw no reason to hide it.

“It’s on Matsunaga’s blog,” Ichiro said, bringing up one of his past articles to show Felicia.

Kirschwasser peered at it, too, and let out a faint groan. The article had gone up just a few days ago.

“What? Is it about Itchy?” she asked.

“Yes, but that article will not paint Master Ichiro in a flattering light. You may not enjoy reading it.”

“Okay, I won’t read it,” Felicia said.

As far as Ichiro could tell, the site was quite biased, so while it made for interesting reading material, he found it to be an unreliable source. Kirschwasser was right when he said that it painted Ichiro as the villain in a conflict that had happened several days before. But as Ichiro seldom cared what others thought about him, he wasn’t especially angry about it.

Felicia frowned. “So he wrote a smear article about you, and now he wants you on his quest team? That’s kind of...”

“Yes, it’s extremely shameless,” Ichiro grinned. Perhaps he had even meant it as a compliment.

Ichiro described the e-mail Matsunaga had sent to him in more detail. It indicated that there was a possibility that, after the event to trigger the Grand Boss below was activated, the dungeon’s bottom floor might be cut off from the surface. This was merely an unproven hypothesis, but at the very least, it would take a long time to travel from one to the other, which meant that the players who triggered the event on the bottom floor could not participate in the defeat of the Grand Boss.

“This is going to get messy,” Kirschwasser murmured as he listened.

“What do you mean?” Felicia asked.

“The common goal of all players is to defeat Grand Bosses and clear Grand Quests. You would be hard-pressed to find anyone willing to give up on that chance,” he said.

“But someone has to be on the lowest floor activating the monument,” Ichiro responded. “Quite a few someones, at that. You’ll need spellcasters to trigger the monument, skilled Thieves and Scouts to navigate the dungeon, and powerful damage-dealers, too, given the large number of monsters you’ll face on the way.”

In other words, in the battle against the Grand Boss, a significant force would have to be diverted to the lower levels. But, as Kirschwasser had explained, everyone would want to fight the Grand Boss themselves, and push for someone else to be on the dungeon team. It was, indeed, a messy situation.

Felicia grimaced openly. “So is that what they’ll discuss at the conference?”

“Perhaps. I think that when they read this, most players will attempt to recruit the aid of other guilds and top players to trigger the event down below while they fight the boss up on the surface.” Ichiro gazed into the eyes of the silent, scowling Felicia.

Felicia didn’t seem to much care for the way the discussion was going,

demonstrating a self-righteousness characteristic to girls her age. It was clear that she disliked this sort of quasi-open calculation.

“Whom else has he invited?” Kirschwasser asked. He didn’t seem to mind in the least.

Ichiro went back to his inbox and checked the body of the message again. “It says he contacted the Red Sunset Knights, too.”

“Oh-ho!” Kirschwasser let out a noise of admiration. “An alliance between two of the Three Great Guilds?”

“You make it sound very impressive, but I’m afraid it doesn’t resonate for me the same way,” Ichiro said.

“Me, either.” Felicia’s reaction was a muted one.

Ichiro felt similarly. Perhaps it was because he had only recently learned of them. But then, even if he had been very familiar with them, it was very unlikely that he would feel the same admiration as Kirschwasser. Ichiro’s basic stance was to mind his own business and pay little heed to the concerns of others.

“I’ll read the message out,” Ichiro said. “It says they’ve assembled ‘only the finest’ for the party. ‘The leader of the largest guild and his four generals...’” That likely referred to the Knights. “‘The brave hero who has never logged out since the service launched, a beloved adventurer who has logged 2,000 friends, a warrior who has skipped school to max out all their skill levels... There are too many to name in all, but we’ll have a party strong enough to take out any Grand Boss. We even have a player who took out a Magi-Metal Dragon solo.’”

“Wouldn’t you die if you never logged out?” Felicia remarked, accurately. “And isn’t 999 the max number of friends you can have?”

“That message may be slightly exaggerated,” Kirschwasser spoke gravely. “But I more or less understand who he means. They’re all relatively famous players.”

“The one who beat a Magi-Metal Dragon solo is me, isn’t it?” Ichiro asked.

“When did that happen?!” Felicia exclaimed.

“Recently.”

It seemed that, aside from the Knights, the players Matsunaga had reached

out to were not necessarily ones associated with large guilds, but instead those who had earned fame on their own terms. Perhaps he had deemed players like that easier to manage, given the unique needs of this quest. Ichiro didn't know this Matsunaga very well, but he didn't judge him to be the sort to form his United Guild haphazardly.

Still scowling, Felicia peeked into the open window Ichiro was looking at. "The player who skipped school to get maxed out skills must be Kiryu..." she said, pointing out the one line in Matsunaga's message. "Which means that Kiryu might be at the meeting, right?"

"It's entirely possible," Ichiro said. He was definitely one of the game's top players, and thus, he would surely have interest in beating the Grand Quest.

On the other hand, they called King Kirihito the ultimate solo player, so it was doubtful that he might want to participate in a coalition like this.

"Itchy, will you be going to the meeting?" Felicia asked.

"I plan to. Of course, King may be there, or he may not. To find out whether or not he will is part of the reason I want to go."

The Grand Quest strategy meeting was to be held in the wilds of the Delve Necrolands.

"A joint operation between the Red Sunset Knights and the Dual Serpents," Matsunaga's aggregate blog proudly proclaimed. In addition to the two great guilds working together, the strength of the other names mentioned had gathered attention of many, which had resulted in the higher-than-usual attendance in the Delve Necrolands that day.

Matsunaga would be recording the conference with the video capture app, and streaming it live. Mid-level players who were curious but not strong enough to make it to the Delve Necrolands piled into the streaming channel to watch.

So it is a big deal after all, Ichiro thought as he took his place at the meeting.

He wasn't sure why Matsunaga had chosen to broadcast it on such a wide scale, but either way, his advertising had been extremely effective. It was clear that disseminating information all over the web was one of the man's strengths.

A round table object had been set in the middle of the field's main thoroughfare to set the stage for the meeting. Several Acolyte class characters were projecting Saint Barriers to keep enemy mobs from interrupting. The many famous players invited directly by Matsunaga sat at the table, while many others crowded around it.

There was one empty seat at the round table. King Kirihito's, most likely. In the end, he hadn't shown up. Ichiro couldn't find him among those sitting around the table.

"Greetings, everyone," the Elf in the green coat said. "Thank you for accepting my invitation. As I believe you all know, I am Matsunaga."

The players seated at the table included him, Stroganoff, and the Red Sunset Knights' four team commanders. There were two players Ichiro had never seen before, as well as two of the Knights' team commanders who were complete strangers to him. He knew they were supposed to be impressive, but it still hardly registered with him.

"This quest will need to be dealt with simultaneously on two different fronts," Matsunaga said. "It is for this reason that I gathered you all here today. Now, shall we go around the table and introduce ourselves?"

"I believe I know everyone here," Stroganoff said, crossing his arms from his seated position. "But I haven't spoken to them directly. And introductions are necessary in the name of courtesy."

"Well, then, if I may..." The Elf Scout Matsunaga cast the group an artificial smile and gave a small cough before beginning. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Matsunaga, leader of the Dual Serpents. My race is Elf. My classes are Scout, Thief, and Shinobi. As you can likely infer, I specialize in exploration and information gathering. I'm not especially good at fighting."

As he finished, Matsunaga cast a glance to Stroganoff in the seat beside him. The red-haired giant grunted in response.

"Leader of the Red Sunset Knights, Stroganoff. Human Knight, subclasses are Fighter and Samurai. I'm a DPS-specialized heavy warrior, and my preferred weapon is the two-handed sword."

“Gazpacho, also from the Red Sunset Knights. Dwarf, Fighter, Blacksmith, Knight. Axe is my main.”

After Stroganoff and Gazpacho introduced themselves, the rest of the Red Sunset Knights followed suit. The Paladin Tiramisu, the Mage Gorgonzola, the Ranger Parmigiano-Reggiano. All very delicious names.

It was becoming clear that the Knights weren’t just a large guild, but had a good balance among their commanders. The four of them, plus Stroganoff, would likely be the strongest party in *Narrow Fantasy Online*, even if they took on a dungeon by themselves.

Ichiro cast a glance at Felicia and Kirschwasser, who were sitting in the bleachers. Kirschwasser was looking on with great interest, while Felicia seemed indifferent. Well, it likely wasn’t very interesting to watch.

The introductions continued to Parmigiano’s left. This was one of the faces Ichiro didn’t recognize.

“I am the High Elf Tomakomai. I did not expect to be called to such an event, so this is quite novel. My class is Philosopher, to which I added the Grappler class for fun.” The androgynous High Elf with the faint green glasses smiled.

A buzz spread through the audience.

“Isn’t that the...”

“The player who hasn’t logged out since the service started...”

“Are you kidding me?”

Realistically speaking, it seemed impossible that you could play that long without ever logging out, but everyone appeared to have heard the rumor.

Next to Tomakomai sat an Anthromorph with cat ears. This one was female.

“I’m Amesho! Me-ow do you do?”

Ichiro winced. The others glared daggers at her.

Tomakomai turned to address her with a gentle smile. “Amesho, could you please speak normally here?”

“Aww, if mew insist... Okay.” The Anthromorph, Amesho, cleared her throat.

“Let’s see... I’m an Anthromorph Thief, and I’ve got so many friends! Lots of rare items, too!”

This sent another buzz through the crowd.

“Isn’t that the...”

“The player who has over 2,000 friends...”

“Are you kidding me?”

Of course, the maximum number of friends you could register in the game was 999.

“Next, Mr. Tsuwabuki.”

“Hmm?” At Matsunaga’s prompting, Ichiro held up a hand and answered. “I am Ichiro Tsuwabuki, a Dragonet Magi-Fencer. I came because I was invited, though I’ve only been playing for a short time. I believe my abilities are easily on par with yours, though, so there’s no need to worry.”

Yet another buzz ran through the crowd.

“Isn’t that the...”

“The player who buys over a million microtransactions a day...”

“Are you kidding me?”

It wasn’t quite right, but not far from the truth. He cast a glance at Felicia in the stands. She looked mortified, but Ichiro didn’t care.

Just then, Amesho began tugging at his sleeve. “Hey, hey. Are you the one Matsunaga mentioned in his message? The one who skipped school to max out all his skill levels?”

“No, I’m the one who defeated a Magi-Metal Dragon solo. The one you’re referring to does not appear to have come.” Ichiro indicated the empty seat at the table.

“It does seem we’re missing one, but I suppose that was to be expected.” With the introductions out of the way, Matsunaga spoke up.

“We have around us the game’s most famous players. Isn’t it sensational? This is how a VRMMO works. It’s the devs who write the scripts, but we’re the ones who act them out. Such things are of utmost importance.

“Enough, Matsunaga,” Stroganoff interrupted as Matsunaga rattled on. “Let’s get down to business. Due to IRL concerns, Gazpacho and I must leave by 11:00 at the latest.”

“Oh, that’s right, Stroganoff. Your job,” Matsunaga said. “Then let us discuss. Of course, the business is more or less what I described in my message. I’ve explained it on my blog, as well, and I believe everyone knows the situation by now.”

The guild led by Matsunaga, the Dual Serpents, had reached the lowest floor of the Grand Quest dungeon, the Forgotten Catacombs, yesterday. They’d shared the results of their investigation, and the conclusions they had come to.

Sorting through all the script and setting fluff, he had decided that the quest was likely to take place on two levels.

In the previous six Grand Quests, the Grand Boss was waiting on the lowest level of the dungeon, and the defeat of that boss cleared the quest. The Dual Serpents and the Red Sunset Knights had cultivated a close relationship based on information sharing. Matsunaga’s group would get the fundamental information on the dungeon and its boss, and Stroganoff’s group would execute a plan of attack based on that. Everyone had expected that this time would be the same.

“But that won’t work this time. There will likely be two boss monsters, or a boss and an enemy of equivalent power. One will be at the bottom of the

dungeon; the other, on the main thoroughfare. It's likely that the quest requirement 'Stop the Source of the Miasma' will be resolved when the Grand Boss on the surface is defeated, thus making it the 'true' boss."

But at the same time, Matsunaga continued, he had determined that the Grand Boss spawn event wouldn't trigger unless someone cleared the obstacles on the lowest level of the dungeon first. Therein lay the problem.

He had decided to designate the process of getting to the bottom of the dungeon and removing the obstacles there Sequence A, and the battle with the Grand Boss on the surface Sequence B. Naturally, Sequence B could not be accomplished until Sequence A was completed, but most of the players participating in the Grand Quest would be more interested in Sequence B.

Matsunaga's investigation of the Forgotten Catacombs had suggested that completing Sequence A would require some very experienced players. Given their usual way of executing their plans, that burden would usually fall to the Red Sunset Knights, but they weren't about to agree to that so easily.

The players who participated in Sequence A would be far enough from the second event that they would probably miss the first run against the boss. They might not even get to participate in Sequence B at all.

The Knights were a guild of Achievers, specialized in combat. Their ambition was to defeat the Grand Boss and to carve their names forever into Asgard history.

Thus, Matsunaga proposed a plan:

The Dual Serpents were dungeon rush specialists, so they would join a mixed team heading for the bottom floor. The main force of the Knights would remain above-ground, where they could accomplish their primary goal of defeating the Grand Boss.

Naturally, if a boss monster were to appear at the end of Sequence A, then the dungeon-diving team would need some skilled fighters, as well. Some division of battle power would be needed, which was why he had invited famous players not affiliated with the two great guilds.

"It seems you have the plan already worked out," Stroganoff said with a sharp

gaze. “So the purpose of the meeting is to discuss how to divide our forces, is that right?”

“Well, more or less,” Matsunaga said breezily. “But Stroganoff, you mustn’t think you’ll get to steal all the spotlight. This is the Grand Quest in preparation for the game’s one-year anniversary. The developers are clearly putting a lot of work into it. And I’m sure the top players we’ve brought here want to defeat the Grand Boss themselves.”

All eyes turned to the three top players invited who weren’t from the guilds. In other words, Ichiro, Amesho, and Tomakomai.

They were all assumed to be quite powerful, but they were as well known for their eccentricities as anything. If Matsunaga was right, then at the very least, it wasn’t clear from looking at their expressions. Ichiro was placid, Amesho was grinning, and Tomakomai was smiling gently.

Ichiro checked on Felicia, who was still sitting in the stands.

Matsunaga had been keeping the reins on the conference, skillfully controlling the entire conversation. Fast talkers like him could be found everywhere, of course, but judging from Felicia’s attitude earlier, she’d seemed to find it unpleasant. She wasn’t the only one.

Matsunaga’s unsubtle dominance of the conversation was earning him glares and scowls from Stroganoff’s Knights. It was hard to say whether their attitudes were just a part of an extended roleplay, or some other calculation.

“But you mentioned that triggering the event would require spellcasters, didn’t you?” Stroganoff asked.

“Yes, I did,” Matsunaga said.

“Then the Philosopher and Magi-Fencer should head for the bottom floor. Thief is a class best suited for dungeon-diving, too. Shouldn’t they be the ones to go underground? I hear Tsuwabuki there reached the bottom floor solo.”

That last line sent a new buzz through the audience.

To his right, he could hear Amesho murmur, “Wow, amazing.”

Ichiro naturally replied that, yes, he was amazing.

“For such a large man, your way of thinking is very petty, Stroganoff,” Matsunaga said with a chuckle.

“First, as leader of the Knights, you should offer up some of your own members as a show of good faith. I believe Gorgonzola is an excellent spellcaster, and Parmigiano quite the fine explorer.”

Matsunaga’s words had some logic to them. They would need high-level spellcasters and explorers to complete the underground dungeon segment. In addition to being part of the top player guild, the two that Matsunaga had mentioned had powerful support and analytical abilities. They were well-suited to dungeon-diving.

But they were also an essential part of the Knights’ basic teamwork tactics. Gorgonzola was a high-DPS spellcaster, and Parmigiano was excellent with ranged weapons. Sending those two down into the dungeon would cripple the Knights’ ability to coordinate against the Grand Boss. That was a hard pill for Stroganoff to swallow.

The two stared at each other, sparks flying between them. Matsunaga was intentionally trying to weaken the Knights in the battle above. That was why he had invited the three top players. If King Kirihito had also come, it would have reduced the necessity of sending the Knights against the Grand Boss even more. He alone could handle all the work of a single Knight corps.

Naturally, the Knights weren’t going to stand for letting their credit be stolen in the name of some “united front” with the other top players. But since they had come there on the pretense of cooperating to finish the quest, they couldn’t exactly say that.

Calculation met calculation. Ichiro turned his eyes back to the gallery in time to see Felicia getting out of her seat. Perhaps she couldn’t stand it anymore.

He couldn’t blame her. It likely wasn’t an interesting conference to watch, and King Kirihito a.k.a. Sera Kiryu hadn’t even shown up.

The staring contest that seemed like it might go on forever was broken with a single word from the young heir, Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

“I think I’ll go below.”

His pronouncement sent a shockwave out from the table, which continued into the stands.

“I have no interest in the glory of slaying the boss. Of course, I’m not especially interested in what’s going on at the bottom of the dungeon either... but I am the strongest of those assembled here, aren’t I?”

It was not a line one should be saying at a meeting of the game’s top players. They all glared at him, itching with the need to argue. But it would be a waste of effort. His expression showed him to be as pliable as a willow.

In addition, the truth was, they couldn’t deny it. It wasn’t that they thought of themselves as weaker than Ichiro, but if they didn’t concede the point now, Ichiro would keep arguing instead of moving on to his next point.

Amesho was giggling, while the others gritted their teeth in silence.

“That’s why you want me far away from the surface, is it not?” Ichiro asked. “Matsunaga, and Stroganoff, as well... Am I wrong?”

“You are, of course, correct, Mr. Tsuwabuki,” Matsunaga assented with a thin smile.

Stroganoff remained silent, but didn’t deny it.

“I wasn’t expecting you to be the first to speak up,” Ichiro said. “Oh, that’s right. Naturally, I’ll be going down below, along with all members of the Dual Serpents. Stroganoff is being unyielding, so let’s ask Tomakomai and Amesho first. What do you want to do?”

“What else can we mew?” Amesho was the first to speak. “I’m fine going underground. I’ll go in Parmigiano’s place.”

“Thank you,” Parmigiano said.

They seemed to come to some strange agreement, perhaps as fellow cat people.

Thus, the Knights’ ranged specialist, Shooting Star Parmigiano, would be allowed to remain on the surface. All eyes fell once again on Stroganoff and “Demon” Gorgonzola.

Matsunaga let out an artificial laugh, then nudged the red-haired Knight once

more. “Still being stubborn, Stroganoff? Two of the three top players have indulged you. Surely you could at least send out your top Mage.”

Stroganoff folded his arms and sat silent for a time, then turned his eyes to his third squad commander, two seats down. “Apologies, Gorgon.”

“Not at all.” That was all the Elf man in the full-body indigo robe had to say.

And so, the famed top players worked out their teams for the completion of the Grand Quest.

The surface team would be the Human Knight Stroganoff, the Dwarf Fighter Gazpacho, the Human Paladin Tiramisu, the Anthromorph Ranger Parmigiano, and High Elf Philosopher Tomakomai.

The underground team would be the Elf Scout Matsunaga, the Dragonet Magi-Fencer Ichiro Tsuwabuki, the Elf Mage Gorgonzola, and the Beastman Thief Amesho.

It’s all nonsense, thought Ichiro. Nearly the entire conference had gone just as Matsunaga wished it. It was a farce.

The moment Matsunaga declared the conference over, Ichiro stood up swiftly and took his leave.

The conference was taking place in the middle of the Necrolands, with the Saint Barrier the only thing protecting them from hordes of the walking dead.

Felicia had left her seat, unable to take watching the conference any longer, but she couldn’t bring herself to roam out into the Necrolands swarming with high-level monsters. All she could do was just sit at the far edge of the barrier, watching the zombies wander through the ghost town in the distance.

Were all top players really people like them?

To Felicia, that conference had just looked like an ugly struggle for dominance.

It wasn’t that she disliked the game. She had initially joined *NaroFan* to find her friend, but to be honest, she also quite enjoyed defeating monsters and gaining levels. Shouldn’t the game be more like that, with everyone just having fun together?

Felicia turned that over and over again in her mind as she gazed off at the distant zombies.

Just then...

“Hey, Felicia.”

She turned instinctively to the voice behind her. It came from a young man in a glossy black suit, the usual cool smile on his face.

“Itchy...”

Inevitably, it was Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

“Is the conference over?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. May I join you?”

“Okay...”

Ichiro sat next to Felicia, still smiling.

She could see the spectators exiting the bleachers, confirming what he had said about the conference being over. Some stuck around to exchange small talk, while others left the barrier’s range immediately.

“What happened?” she asked. “I thought no one wanted to go underground...”

“Well, it was less that no one wanted to go underground and more a contest of wills between Matsunaga and Stroganoff. I’m part of the underground team.”

“Oh?” She knew that Ichiro wouldn’t have much interest in the Grand Boss, but she wouldn’t have expected him to join the underground team, either. The Itchy she knew wasn’t the type to compromise.

Ichiro lifted a finger in response to Felicia’s skeptical comment. “Let’s see if I can guess what you’re thinking.”

“Huh?”

“While watching the top players at their conference, you began to feel a degree of contempt towards them. Then, you began to wonder if King Kirihito a.k.a. Sera Kiryu was just like them, a thought which led you into self-recrimination. Am I right?”

“Ugh...” she said. Ichiro’s guess was right on the mark. It was as if he could read her mind.

Felicia really didn’t want to believe that her friend was as shallow as the people at that conference. She didn’t want to, but she was beginning to think that way. Ever since the incident yesterday, she had started to wonder if she really understood Sera Kiryu at all.

Ichiro continued, “There are two things that I can say. Number one: They are enjoying the game in their own way. This is a pure, innocent feeling. It may seem grating to an outside observer, but I believe it’s something to be respected.”

“What’s number two?”

“King wasn’t even there, so you probably shouldn’t worry about it,” he said, lightly. She had to admit he was right.

The words seemed to spring from Felicia’s mouth, unbidden. “Kiryu’s...”

“Hmm?” Ichiro urged her on immediately.

She hadn’t meant to give voice to those thoughts, but realizing that maybe it was something she needed to tell Ichiro, she continued. “Kiryu’s really good at gaming, but doesn’t really like games.”

“Oh.” It was a neutral response, free of emotion, but she could tell he found it surprising.

“That’s not to say Kiryu hates them. It’s more like... ‘I found out gaming was the thing I was best at, so I just naturally end up playing games.’”

That was something Sera had told her just before they entered middle school. Sera was invincible when it came to computer games, and while not quite as dominant when it came to board games, she had still never seen her friend even break a sweat at card games or Othello.

Sera specialized in action games, but excelled at strategy games, as well. Anything, basically, that didn’t require physical activity.

“It sounds like your friend is a born genius,” Ichiro said. “You do see people like that from time to time.”

“You say that so lightly, Itchy...” Felicia said with a frown. Perhaps even born

geniuses couldn't compete with Ichiro Tsuwabuki most of the time.

"I'm a pitcher in the softball club," Felicia continued.

"Yes, you mentioned you're their ace, didn't you?" he answered.

"Our club isn't that good, and I'm not especially talented," she admitted. "But I love softball, so even if I found something I was better at, I'd probably want to keep doing it. So..."

"It makes it feel even more like Sera Kiryu is taking the path of least resistance?" Ichiro said, giving her a chance to hedge.

"Yeah..."

"Then you have no choice but to speak to your friend," he said.

In the end, that was it. Felicia — Asuha Tsuwabuki — believed that Sera Kiryu was fleeing the rigors of reality by retreating into a game. She believed it was her duty to bring her friend back out so that they could go to school together. That belief hadn't changed in any notable way.

But what if Sera's feelings weren't so simple? Dragging her friend back into the real world might not necessarily be the best course of action. So, in the end, all she could do was ask and find out.

And yet, she thought...

"I don't know where Kiryu is right now."

"True," Ichiro nodded. "But that only applies to the game. There is another method by which you could talk to Sera Kiryu."

And there it was. Felicia looked away. "Go to Kiryu's house, you mean?"

"Felicia... Asuha, rather. I'm sure this is not the first time the idea has occurred to you."

She hesitated. Of course, Ichiro was right.

"K-Kiryu's house, huh?" she murmured with great hesitance. "I don't want to go... I mean, it would have been awkward from the beginning, but after what I did yesterday..." Felicia mumbled indistinctly as her gaze continued to drift.

But then, what happened yesterday was all the more reason she had to go.

She and Sera would never reach an understanding if they didn't talk.

"You're searching for King, are you?" The voice, like a coiling serpent, echoed out of the ruined town.

Felicia immediately latched on to Ichiro's jacket sleeve.

It was a familiar voice. Felicia turned and saw an Elf man standing there, his golden hair blowing in the dry Necrolands wind. He wore a dark green coat over a ninja's uniform. Felicia did not bother to hide her displeasure at the sight of him.

"A fine conference, Matsunaga," Ichiro said.

Indeed, it was Matsunaga, leader of the Dual Serpents, the organizer of the conference, and of the United Guild.

"Thank you. We've never been properly introduced... I am Matsunaga. Really, I didn't expect you to come to our little meeting, Mr. Tsuwabuki. I'm sorry about that article I wrote about you the other day," Matsunaga said with his artificial smile.

So they had never met face-to-face before now? Ichiro had caused some trouble not long ago, and Matsunaga had written an article about it. It seemed that was as much as they had ever interacted.

"It didn't bother me in the least," Ichiro said, brushing off the words easily before changing the subject. "I wasn't expecting to see you out already. I assumed you'd still be hashing out details with Stroganoff."

"Actually, the one participating in the conference was a kagemusha, a body double," Matsunaga said with a chuckle. "I love verifying things, you see. I have multiple accounts, all with the same face. It's very convenient for times like these."

With that, Matsunaga snapped his fingers. The air around them wavered, and several figures appeared. They were all handsome, smiling Elves wearing identical ninja gear and coats. "Matsunaga" was the name on each.

It was extremely unsettling, and inspired a powerful feeling of déjà vu.

"Why does this keep happening lately?" Felicia groaned.

“Indeed,” Ichiro agreed.

“I thought it made for a good show. You don’t like it?” Matsunaga snapped his fingers again, and the kagemusha Matsunagas all disappeared instantly. They must have had players behind them, suggesting a powerful degree of authority he held over them. Or perhaps they simply enjoyed playing the anonymous kagemusha role.

“Well, then, Matsunaga. Do you know where King Kirihito is?” Ichiro asked.

Given his opening statement, it seemed natural to assume that he did.

“No, I don’t,” denied Matsunaga with a grin. “It’s just, how to put it... Out of the kindness of my heart, I would ask you to stop searching for King.”

“Weren’t you searching for him?” Ichiro asked. “You invited him to your conference.”

“I ran into him yesterday at the bottom floor of the dungeon. I invited him, but of course, he turned me down. So I wasn’t expecting to see him there,” Matsunaga said.

Matsunaga was the kind of man for whom every word and smile seemed to have a double meaning.

Felicia moved behind Ichiro, not bothering to hide her caution in his presence. She couldn’t tell if he was roleplaying, or if this was simply how he talked, but either way, Felicia didn’t like men who smiled like that.

“You know Kiry... ihito?” Felicia asked, still gripping Ichiro’s sleeve.

“Know him? Hmm... we’ve crossed paths in the dungeons a handful of times. After all, I’m in an explorer’s guild, and I like verifying things, which often leads to me diving into unexplored dungeon depths. Sometimes I’ll reach the lowest floor of a dungeon, and just as I begin thinking, ‘Ah, I’m the first one here!’ I find King there, as nonchalant as can be.”

“Oh? That’s impressive,” Ichiro said.

“He must recognize me by now, as he’s greeted me a few times. But he may not remember my name. That’s about the size of our acquaintance.” Matsunaga shrugged.

Felicia wasn't sure how to react to his implication that this made him and King Kirihito close.

"On that subject, Mr. Tsuwabuki," Matsunaga said, "a question. Were you diving the Catacombs by yourself? That's impressive."

"I wasn't by myself. She was with me," Ichiro responded, indicating Felicia.

Matsunaga laughed. "That's effectively by yourself."

"Certainly. But while, effectively, I was by myself, to insist that I was alone would be to ignore Felicia's existence. I cannot approve of that... even if, effectively, I was by myself."

Felicia snapped, "Sorry for not being more useful! Sorry I'm only level 39!"

"Ah, you gained a level? Congratulations."

"Congratulations, indeed. Once you hit 40, you clear most of the equipment restrictions, and everything becomes much easier," Matsunaga said.

Ichiro and Matsunaga both applauded her, smiling. It seemed like they meant it sincerely, but Felicia was in no mood to accept the praise without reservation. She just clung tighter to Ichiro's sleeve and grumbled.

"Given your level of skill, I had assumed you would want to fight the boss on the surface," Matsunaga commented, turning back to Ichiro.

"As I said at the conference, it simply doesn't interest me," he replied. "You also seemed to want to keep me away from the surface, so why complain?"

Felicia didn't quite like the tone she heard in Ichiro's words. He probably wasn't lying; Ichiro had shown no interest in going after the boss on the surface. But she also wouldn't expect him to just go along that easily with Matsunaga's schemes. Ichiro must have seen some personal gain to be had in going along with the underground group. It would have been possible for him to simply not join the United Guild, so what was his reason for going along with this man's request?

She channeled those doubts into stinging words directed at Matsunaga. "Exactly what's so great about beating the boss on the surface?"

Felicia's words were a rebuke to both Stroganoff, who was trying to keep his

Knights force strong and united against the boss, and the scheming Matsunaga, who had been plotting to tear them apart.

Matsunaga's smile did not waver, even as he scratched his cheek self-consciously. "Miss... Felicia, is it? Do you play any online games besides *NaroFan*?"

"No."

"I thought not. You didn't look like a hardcore gamer. Then you don't know, I suppose. Defeating the boss on the surface is a truly amazing thing." For once, his tone was entirely straightforward. "Of course, it's amazing because we as a group have assigned value to it. This is all just a program to begin with. The developers control everything. But, you see... we've all invested our blood, sweat, and tears into making our game characters stronger. Those who share that common objective wish to prove their strength to each other, and defeating a boss confers a certain amount of status in that regard."

She could at least understand the logic behind his words, but she rejected it on an emotional level. "But it's still just a game..."

"What's wrong with just being a game? Surely you have things that you're passionate about," he said, arguing with enthusiasm. It seemed clear that Matsunaga was quite a heavy gamer.

Ichiro commented, "But Matsunaga, you seem to lack a certain interest in defeating the boss, as well."

Matsunaga smiled in response to Ichiro's observation. "Ah, could you tell? Yes, I'm part of the dungeon crawl team. Though it's not that I lack interest, exactly... but I'm happy as long as my blog flourishes as a result. I enjoy feeling like I've created an event."

It was unlikely that Felicia would be able to accept Matsunaga's words at this point in her life. The self-righteousness typical of girls of her age was a block against such understanding.

"I believe she doesn't like me," Matsunaga noted.

"It appears so," Ichiro agreed. "I'm sorry. You may be roleplaying your character's villainous tendencies a bit more than is necessary."

“I don’t mind. That’s my guild’s policy.” It was hard to tell how serious Matsunaga was being, but he waved his hand and turned away with a flourish of his coat.

“Are you going?” Ichiro asked.

“I have a few arrangements to make. I’ll see you, Mr. Tsuwabuki. I look forward to tomorrow.” With that, he began walking away.

Once he was out of sight and Ichiro and Felicia were left alone in the Necrolands’ ghost town again, Felicia spoke through her pursed lips.

“Itchy. You are participating, aren’t you? In the quest, I mean...”

“Does that upset you?” Ichiro faced her, his smile as cool as ever. “Felicia, I told you that I would accompany you until we found Sera Kiryu. And I also told you that once we did, it would be up to you to decide what to do.”

“R-Right...”

“We have found Sera Kiryu. Maybe you didn’t know what you wanted from that at first, but I think you now have a starting point. In other words, you’ve passed the first hurdle. If you want to try to approach King again, you should do what it is that you want to do. And I will do what I want to do. Our initial promise has not changed.”

Ichiro’s attitude was as self-serving as ever. It was no way to speak to a 14-year-old girl. Felicia was about to comment on that, lowering her face, then raising it again to try to speak. But she closed her mouth a moment after opening it.

Felicia knew. She really knew. She knew what it would mean if she accused him of being cruel, or asked him to help her out more than he already had.

Asuha Tsuwabuki was an adult now. At least, she had insisted that this was the case. Ichiro was merely speaking the way that one would to an adult.

The truth was, she wanted Itchy’s help. The thought of dealing with things on her own made her nervous. She felt the same way when it came to Kiryu. As she was now, Asuha had no faith that she could pull Sera Kiryu back by herself.

And yet...

Felicia nodded. “Okay. Got it.”

Itchy was merely treating her as an adult, as an equal. Felicia knew that he was acting colder to her than she had expected, but she had no intention of asking for special treatment and regressing back to childhood.

Ichiro was busy with his own concerns. To ask him to come back with her and continue to help her search for Sera Kiryu would just be selfishness. She was no longer a child.

“Now that we have that all worked out, shall we return? I expect Sir Kirschwasser is feeling lonely without us,” Ichiro said.

“Sure,” she agreed, and the two began to walk side by side down the Necrolands’ main street.

4 - Noble Son, Descend

Asuha Tsuwabuki was a 14-year-old girl attending a middle school in Nagoya. She didn't yet know what she wanted to be when she grew up.

Turning 14 meant that she was an adult (at least, that was how she felt about it), and adults needed to solve their own problems. To throw a tantrum because nobody would help her was something a child did.

Asuha couldn't understand what was going through Ichiro Tsuwabuki's mind. In the 14 years she had known him, she had never been able to. Itchy was nice, and cool, and he often did whatever she asked, but she had never seen him compromise on the things he wanted to do. That he usually did whatever she asked didn't mean that he always acted in her best interest.

Asuha was wandering around a residential block in Nagoya, having gotten Sera Kiryu's address from her homeroom teacher. Apparently the teachers knew that the two of them had been friends since elementary school and, concerned about Sera's non-attendance, they had given Asuha the address on the condition of secrecy.

They *were* friends, supposedly. But this would be Asuha's first time visiting this house.

It was neither large nor small, just an ordinary residential home. Still, to someone like Asuha, who lived in an apartment, having a real house still conveyed a certain degree of wealth. She felt a little discouraged.

"Yes, who's there?" a clear, feminine voice responded to Asuha's press of the intercom button. It was Sera's mother.

"Oh. Hello... Um, well, my name is Asuha Tsuwabuki, and, um..."

"Oh, Sera's friend?"

Was she going to be allowed in as easily as that?

The door opened to reveal the familiar figure of Sera's mother. She was a

beautiful woman, completely unchanged from the day they had first met years ago at the arcade. It occurred to Asuha, for the first time, that Sera strongly took after her.

“Hello, Asuha dear. Come in, come in,” Sera’s mother said.

Asuha was vaguely startled. Was she actually being welcomed?

“There is another method by which you could talk to Sera Kiryu,” Ichiro had told Asuha yesterday in the game.

She had always known that if she couldn’t find King Kirihito in the game — and really, even if she could — that visiting his player at home would be a lot faster. Yet she had balked at the idea. She felt guilty over not having noticed that Sera was being bullied, like she had let her friend down somehow. In truth, it was Asuha who was most afraid of the face-to-face meeting.

But, Asuha decided, that wasn’t an excuse, so she steeled up her nerve to pay the call.

She knew that Ichiro would be using whatever methods he had at his disposal to meet King Kirihito in the game. She didn’t know what exactly he wanted, but Ichiro had said he would do what he wanted to do.

While he had always respected Asuha’s desires, he never compromised his own. And when they had met Sera in the game world, he had shown no deference at all to Asuha’s desires before adopting his own approach.

Besides, she wanted to make amends.

“It’s a bit of a mess. I’m sorry,” Sera’s mother said as they passed through the living room.

Asuha looked around, stunned.

It was game systems as far as the eye could see. Game systems from all companies and eras were hooked up to the TVs. There were multiple PCs, too. And not just that. In one corner of the room, collecting dust, covered in books and game software... was that a cabinet for a popular arcade fighting game?

“U-Um... Is that...”

“Ah. Er, the truth is, I enjoy games quite a bit. My husband doesn’t, I’m

afraid... But I once had quite the local reputation as a gamer," Sera's mother admitted.

It appeared Sera had received some degree of special education from a young age. Perhaps it was simply in the blood.

While Mrs. Kiryu went up to the second floor to fetch her child, Asuha cast another look around. The walls were packed with framed pictures and awards, all of them gaming related. Asuha was looking at one dated 15 years ago, entitled "With the PPC Siblings at Game Center Arcadia," when Mrs. Kiryu came downstairs again with an apologetic expression on her face.

"I'm sorry, Asuha. Sera won't come down. Could you go up instead?"

"Um, are you sure?" Asuha asked.

"Hmm? Sure about what?"

Asuha answered hesitantly. "Um, is it okay for us to speak face to face...?"

"Ah..." Mrs. Kiryu gave her a slightly pained smile. Judging from the way she was acting, she seemed to have had some idea of what had happened in the game.

"I don't think you need to worry. Sera isn't the type to hold grudges. And you have permission, so go ahead." Kiryu's mother seemed to be the rather carefree type. Even so, nervousness ran through Asuha as she climbed the stairs.

She stood tensely before the door, then gave a soft knock. She heard Sera's husky voice from the other side, saying, "Come in." The tone of the voice was surprisingly calm.

She opened the door and found the room inside dark. The curtains were open, but all the lights were turned off. There were no decorations and no notable possessions except for a desktop PC so impressive it was hard to believe it belonged to a middle school student. Its monitor was the room's sole source of illumination.

Sera Kiryu sat in front of it.

"H-Hey, Kiryu," Asuha said.

"Hey." Kiryu's hair was cut short and androgynous, as always. In one corner of

the room hung a middle school uniform that Asuha could barely imagine Sera wearing; it had been that long since they had met face to face. It didn't seem like an outfit her friend belonged in.

"Kiryu, I... I'm sorry about the other day," Asuha said, leading with an apology.

"Oh, it's okay. I got emotional, too," Sera said, then fell into silence. There was a certain monotone quality to the words.

Asuha looked at the hanging uniform again. Despite not having been worn in close to a year, there was no dust on it at all.

"Listen, Kiryu... Come to school, would you?"

Sera remained silent at first, gazing at the computer screen, but finally turned back to meet Asuha's eyes. "I want to go," her friend said.

Asuha was surprised by the response.

"But I can't."

"Why not?" Asuha asked.

"I'm weak."

Asuha was startled. "You are?"

"Yeah."

Sera apparently believed the bullying at school had been the result of personal weakness, that someone as strong as Asuha would never have been the victim of something like that.

Asuha didn't believe she was that strong at all, but rather than protest immediately, she decided to listen.

Sera went on, saying things like, "I can't go to school if I'm not strong," and, "Even if I try to go, I'll end up not wanting to go again..."

"In that case..." Asuha began, unable to just accept that. She had been feeling a growing sense that something about this was wrong, and at last, decided to come right out with it. "...it's not okay to only be strong in the game."

"Yeah, probably not," Sera agreed.

The response left Asuha feeling a bit deflated. She had expected a stronger comeback.

Sera spoke. “I know it’s not enough to just be strong in the game, but I don’t have any self-confidence... I was hoping the game would be a first step to becoming stronger, but I guess it was just escapism...”

In the dim room, Asuha saw something glitter in Sera’s eyes. She stood there, not knowing what to say.

“I thought that if I could make myself strong in the game, the real me would be stronger, too. But all I’m doing is beating monsters created by a program. I’m not actually dealing with people. I guess that’s not good enough, huh?”

Sera’s grasping at straws, Asuha thought, *in desperation...*

Sera had stopped coming to school because of bullying, lacking the self-described strength necessary to fight back. That didn’t refer to physical strength, but something more internal.

Sera had needed a way to become stronger, and the most immediate solution had been the VRMMO. In other words, Kirschwasser had hit the nail on the head from the start.

From an outsider’s point of view, it did look like mere escapism... and perhaps it was mere sophistry to argue that it wasn’t. Asuha had to admit, even she wasn’t sure. She couldn’t imagine how a game could give anyone the strength to deal with bullies.

As Sera had said, the monsters King Kirihito was beating were just mindless things created by the program.

“I was thinking of completing the Grand Quest myself,” Sera said, looking back at the screen. On the screen was the site vsoku@VRMMO Aggregate Blog, the affiliate site run by that Matsunaga guy. “But at the end of the day, this stupid thing isn’t going to make me strong. Not really.”

“Kiryu...” Asuha saw the self-loathing in Sera’s expression. She wanted to shout, “That’s not true!” but she bit her tongue. She knew that would be an irresponsible thing to say, a pathetic show of kindness to set her own heart at ease.

“Tsuwabuki.” Sera broke away from the screen again to look back at Asuha.

“Wh-What?”

“Um, the old man. Ichiro Tsuwabuki...”

“Yeah?”

“Is he your brother?” Sera asked.

Asuha was surprised by the question. She had never seen Sera Kiryu express interest in any particular individual before.

“Um, well... He’s my cousin. My second cousin, actually. My grandfather is Itchy’s grandfather’s younger brother.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone who talks to their second cousin,” Sera said.

“I guess most people don’t.”

“Do you have a big family, Tsuwabuki?” Sera asked.

It was less a big family, Asuha thought, and more a strongly-connected one. She didn’t know how other families did things, but theirs met up at their great-grandfather’s house in Kyushu every year to celebrate the New Year. No matter how busy they were, even if they were halfway around the world, every one of them came together for a New Year’s banquet with about 50 people. Her friends never failed to be surprised when she told them about that.

“He seemed like a pretty amazing guy,” Sera commented.

“Yeah, Itchy’s really amazing.” Hearing what felt like praise for her beloved second cousin raised Asuha’s spirits a bit, and she immediately launched into a paean for him.

She began with Ichiro being the heir to the Tsuwabuki Concern, how handsome he was even in real life, and how he was so smart he’d graduated from college at a foreign university by the time he’d been their age. She described how he was a genius at sports, and how he ranked as a top artist in the fields of both art and music.

As she rambled on and on, most people would usually shout, “You’re

exaggerating!” But it was all the truth, and Sera listened with great interest.

“I see.” Sera smiled for the first time as Asuha completed her bragging. “Do you love him? Your ‘Itchy’...”

“Huh?” The question so took Asuha by surprise that she couldn’t help but stammer. She knew that it was absurd for her to play dumb. She knew that. He was Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

If it came to love or hate, of course she’d say she loved him, with pride... but for some reason, she was hesitant to admit to it right here and now.

“W-W-Well, um... That’s none of your business, Kiryu!” To hide her sudden and inexplicable reticence, Asuha turned the question back on her friend. “I-I could ask the same of you, anyway! Why are you so interested in Itchy?”

“Hmm...” Sera sat thoughtfully, knees pulled to chest, and finally murmured a soft, “I was just curious,” followed by silence.

It was such a loaded silence that Asuha couldn’t find it in herself to press further. But her friend’s next words were even more unexpected.

“I want to beat him.”

Asuha was stunned. “Kiryu?”

“I think that beating a guy like him would give me a lot of confidence in myself.”

“Even just in the game?” Asuha asked with trepidation. Sera nodded.

“Even just in the game. Maybe all the more *because* it’s a game...”

Asuha was baffled. She knew how talented and amazing Ichiro was. Even in the game, Ichiro was strong. On top of his quick grasp of game fundamentals, he had his naturally quick reflexes and his pay-to-play resources.

Ichiro had seen King Kirihito’s strength, and still felt certain that he could rise above it. If Asuha were to be completely honest, she couldn’t imagine anyone beating her second cousin, ever. Thus, to say “You can beat him,” would be irresponsible.

But to say “You can’t beat him,” would be cruel. Asuha couldn’t say either.

In the end, she could only say one thing. “Itchy will be at the Grand Quest, too.”

Sera Kiryu’s eyes narrowed in the darkness. “He will?”

“And I think he wants to see you, Kiryu.”

“I see...” A smile appeared on Sera’s face, full of meaning Asuha couldn’t understand.

I don’t get it... Asuha thought frustratedly. Was a fundamental distrust of the game standing in the way of her ability to understand? All she could tell was that Ichiro and King Kirihito were bound up in some mutual agreement.

“I’m gonna go,” Sera announced.

“...Okay,” Asuha muttered, trying not to sound too petulant. But before she left, there was one thing she had to say. The one thing that honestly reflected her true feelings. “When you do come to school, I’ll be waiting.”

“Sure.”

Asuha started for the door, but Sera spoke again, giving her pause.

“Tsuwabuki.”

“What?”

“Thanks for coming. It was good to see you.”

“Sure.” The words lightened Asuha’s heart, even if only a bit.

Kiryu’s mother, who had apparently been waiting outside with her ear pressed to the door, must have realized Asuha was coming and quickly straightened out her appearance.

Asuha bowed to her politely, asked to be excused, and then left Sera Kiryu’s house behind.

“Ichiro-sama, what are you looking at?”

Ichiro was enjoying his post-breakfast leisure time on the sofa with his tablet in hand when Sakurako brought him coffee. He placed the tablet on the table to take up the cup.

“Matsunaga’s blog,” he responded.

“Ohhh...” Sakurako bent over to have a look at the screen.

It was vsoku@VRMMO Aggregate Blog, the affiliate site run by Matsunaga of the Dual Serpents. The blog amassed threads from message boards within the VRMMO and other social networks, and Matsunaga himself wrote articles on his own investigations and in-game events. The most popular posts were the event articles.

Matsunaga had feelers everywhere in the game, and he wrote not just about official developer-sponsored events, but also interplayer scuffles and drama, in interesting and funny ways.

The United Guild was no exception.

Any dedicated player would be interested in an event that featured multiple guilds working with top players to complete a Grand Quest, but on top of the event's innate interest, Matsunaga was a master of fanning the flames. The outline alone sounded like a plotline straight out of a manga, even if it was Matsunaga himself who had arranged it that way.

"He's got real talent as a producer," Ichiro said, sounding rather impressed.

"I agree," Sakurako said. "Given the way he seized control of the atmosphere at the conference yesterday and guided it to go just the way he wanted."

"Though it appears that one was just a kagemusha," Ichiro added. "A political decoy."

"Really?!" Sakurako asked, startled.

The article Ichiro was reading described the results of the conference. There was no mention of the friction between the players; it just explained how the teams had been divided roughly between an above-ground boss-slaying team and an underground event-triggering team. It seemed most of the Knights' forces would be focused above-ground, which meant that Stroganoff must have put up quite a fight.

At the end of the article, Matsunaga made a brief mention of King Kirihito, writing that he hadn't come to the conference, but his words implied a sense of certainty that he would show up at some point during the Grand Quest.

"I hadn't noticed before, but he's written quite a lot about King Kirihito in the past, hasn't he?" Sakurako noted.

She was right: Matsunaga occasionally wrote articles about various legends of King that had sprung up within *NaroFan*. One story talked about him beating an earlier Grand Boss solo; another about how he had acquired one of the game's legendary unique weapons.

“Considering the influence that Matsunaga’s blog has, he may even be the originator of King’s ‘legendary’ status,” Ichiro said as he clicked a link to another article about King.

“Do you think there’s a connection between King and Matsunaga?” Sakurako asked.

“I don’t believe so. But Matsunaga seems to want to make sure that people know about King,” Ichiro said.

“Well, he is playing solo in *NaroFan*,” Sakurako said. “That’s a topic ripe for interest...”

Ichiro had suspected some ulterior motives to Matsunaga’s actions when he had been invited to join the United Guild. Of course, Ichiro didn’t care about those motives — he had taken the invitation because he’d wanted to — but they did seem to have something to do with King Kirihito. It was as if Matsunaga was trying to author a storyline for the world of the VRMMO.

A producer, indeed... Perhaps that was why he had his guild play the role of the villain.

“Really, everyone does enjoy the game in their own way,” Ichiro said with a beaming smile.

“How do you enjoy it, Ichiro-sama?” Sakurako asked.

“Me?” Ichiro brought his coffee to his lips, breathed, and set the cup down. “I believe you know, don’t you?”

“Well, yes, I believe that I do,” she admitted, “but...”

Ichiro closed his eyes and replayed the elegant flow of King Kirihito’s swordplay in his mind. To be honest, he was shaken. Such a thing existing, even within the bounds of a game, completely exceeded his imagination. This was what kept the world interesting: the way it occasionally produced things that far exceeded his expectations.

When Ichiro saw something that moved him profoundly in this way, he had a bad habit of wanting to surpass it. Of course, this only applied when the act lined up with his own inclinations, but the “strength” that King possessed was a

barometer that Ichiro found indispensable to his being.

Any accusations of immaturity he might receive for feeling this way were mere nonsense. If anyone thought it was petty for Ichiro to use everything he had against King Kirihito, they were merely underestimating King Kirihito's capability. To Ichiro, King Kirihito — Sera Kiryu — was unquestionably worth fighting on equal terms. At least, within the world of the game.

"Sakurako-san, are you going to log in today?" he asked.

"Hmm. I'm not terribly interested in participating in the quest," she answered. "Ichiro-sama, you're in the dungeon-crawling team, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I could come accompany you if you want... Though my level may be a bit too low. I think I'll wait until after all my housework is done to log in."

"Hmmm... very well." Ichiro stood up and headed for the Miraive Gear Cocoon he had set up in the game room.

"Are you preparing to log in?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Good travels, then," Sakurako said, in the manner of one sending a warrior off to battle.

But Ichiro's manner was as cool as ever. He merely held up a hand and said, "Mm."

Members of the Dual Serpents made up the lion's share of the dungeon crawl team that Ichiro would be joining, along with the Anthromorph Thief Amesho and the Mage Gorgonzola of the Knights.

Their destination, the Forgotten Catacombs, was swarming with Zombie Legions and many other powerful monsters, but Matsunaga had come up with a rather cheap trick to expedite their journey.

It was based on an exploit of the game's AI. When the number of players on a map surpassed a certain limit, the AI would adjust the quality of the graphics and the frequency of mob spawns to keep the server from getting overloaded. Since

the Forgotten Catacombs was a single map with no transitions, sending a large enough number of players into it at once would force the system to throttle their encounters.

Matsunaga had asked Amesho, who had a great many friends, to supply this large number of players, spamming the dungeon to further guarantee the success of the main team. It seemed the rumors of Amesho having 2,000 friends was not at all exaggerated, as nearly 500 of them, all of them elite players (and all of them male) flooded into the dungeon at the catgirl's call. Having the monster spawn rate so decreased would greatly simplify their quest through the dungeon.

"I hate the choppiness..." Amesho said, waving her arm around.

Ichiro agreed. "I hear the Thistle Corporation's servers and system-regulating supercomputer are quite excellent, but still..."

"It's like an F5 attack... It's not gonna take down the server, is it?" Amesho asked.

"I doubt it." Ichiro had determined that the server load wasn't that extreme just yet.

His Cocoon-type Miraive Gear's 200 teraFLOP image processor was 25 times more powerful than that of the consumer-grade Miraive Gear X. It was on the level of supercomputers in the old days. Combined with the excellent network of Tsuwabuki Estates, it was keeping his movements as smooth as ever. He perceived almost no degradation in experience quality; the power of money at play once more.

"Oh, that's right. I haven't friended you yet." Amesho opened her menu window and sent a friend request without hesitation.

"You really have no scruples, do you?" Ichiro asked.

"You don't wanna be my friend, Tsuwabuki?" Amesho asked.

She was quite short. She had set her height just shorter than the lowest possible height allowed for male avatars so that there was no male avatar that she couldn't look at with upturned eyes. She did this with Ichiro now.

So this is how she has so many friends, Ichiro thought, a piece clicking into place. Sakurako had told him about this. In online games, female players could use their gender as a weapon to more easily acquire items and experience.

“Well, I don’t mind.” Ichiro could see no reason to refuse, so he accepted the friend request.

“Yay! Tsuwabuki is my 3,000th friend!” she exclaimed.

“And you are my fourth.” Ichiro called up the in-game browser and opened Matsunaga’s blog.

The most recent update had been thirty minutes ago. It provided the number of players participating in the plan, a detailed timetable, and at the end, links to videos and past articles.

Matsunaga didn’t outright say that last-minute participants were welcome, but knowing him, he had probably done it to encourage rubberneckers.

“Oh, hello, everyone. How are you?” a flippant voice rang out. Matsunaga himself had just logged in.

“Matsunaga, there are way too many people!” Amesho exclaimed. “Is it all choppy for you, too?”

“I’ve overclocked my image card,” Matsunaga replied, “but even without that, the X’s double-precision floating point can run at eight teras. Unless your network connection is miserable, there should be no fatal drop in performance.”

“Hmm...” Amesho murmured.

Anyone who had bought a Miraive Gear would probably have at least a decent network connection, but those with an already strained network connection — perhaps a public setting — might see lag.

“If you’re really worried, open config and reduce your graphics quality,” Matsunaga said.

“Hmm... naw, thanks. I guess I’ve gotta just deal with it.”

“Would you prefer us to avoid attack magic with flashy visuals?” asked an Elf man clad in an all-concealing indigo robe, approaching them.

It was “Demon” Gorgonzola. He was the Knights’ greatest Mage, and in keeping with his celebrity reputation, he had many attack spell Arts with impressive visuals. Bringing out a series of those in their present environment would certainly put a major burden on the server.

“Ahh, good point,” Matsunaga said. “Perhaps we should let Mr. Tsuwabuki and Miss Amesho, who can deal with mobs in more mundane ways, handle most of it.”

Ichiro just shrugged. He had spells with flashy visuals and sword techniques like Strash, but he could also bulldoze enemies with his brute stats alone, and he also had the Monetary Blade Breaker skill he had worked out the day before. He certainly could fight in ways that wouldn’t burden the server.

Ichiro looked around. Nearly all of the main dungeon crawl force was in place. Most of them were from the Dual Serpents, but the Knights had sent some Scouts and a handful of front-line fighters. It was looking about time to head out.

“Um... Itchy, are you here?” a hesitant voice leaked out.

The group turned in unison to look at the source of it.

“Hey, Felicia,” Ichiro said.

“Ah, Itchy...”

“And Kirihito,” Ichiro added.

It wasn’t King; Kirihito (Leader) of the Kirihitters had accompanied Felicia. As an intermediate-level player, she would have needed him to escort her into a dungeon in the middle of the Necrolands.

When she had thanked him for walking her there, he merely said “We are friends, aren’t we?” and left. Of course, for friends, they weren’t even on each other’s friends lists, but she wasn’t about to comment on that.

“Um, Itchy. I went there today,” she began. She didn’t specify where she had been, but Ichiro understood immediately. She meant Sera Kiryu’s house.

“Hm, so? How did it go?” he asked.

“I don’t know...” she admitted, truthfully. “So I still don’t know what to do.

And I know you'll both just do whatever you want..."

As Felicia pouted, Matsunaga, who had been watching from afar, chose this moment to speak up. "Will you be joining us, Miss Felicia?" he asked.

The question came as a surprise to everyone present. Felicia was the lowest level of the assembled players by a wide margin. She wasn't specialized for dungeon exploration, and it was clear that bringing her along would be nothing but a burden to them.

While Felicia froze up in the face of the unexpected question, Ichiro immediately guessed Matsunaga's scheme. Even so, he said: "If she wants to come, I won't stop her."

"Wait," Gorgonzola's dreary tones emanated from the hood of his robe. "What good will having her along do? I'm not taking responsibility for anything that happens to her, either."

"Aw, let's take her along!" Amesho said with a grin, her reaction the polar opposite of Gorgonzola's. "It'll be easy-peasy with so many of us around! And having more people is always more fun!"

Amesho was correct, of course. Ichiro was confident that he could reach the bottom floor even by himself, and now he was surrounded by fellow elites. They should have no issue protecting Felicia.

Of course, there was no *reason* at all to bring her along...

Felicia was likely well aware that she wouldn't add anything, but after a minute to process the suggestion, she said, "I want to go."

"Yay!" Amesho cried, jumping up and down. "Friend me, okay, Fellie? Hee hee hee, 3,001!"

Amesho strode up to a very disoriented Felicia and pumped her hand enthusiastically.

Ichiro, in that moment, could do no more than speculate as to why Felicia had agreed to go. But whatever the reason, if the once-ambivalent girl was now making decisions for herself, he had to respect those decisions. Such were Ichiro's thoughts as he watched Matsunaga from afar, the man grinning as

things had once again gone as he had orchestrated.

The dungeon crawl proceeded smoothly.

The spam plan had worked like a charm, keeping the powerful mobs to a minimum, and the rest of their fighters were so strong that even without Ichiro, they probably would have had smooth sailing.

“My arms are moving all choppily...” Felicia said.

“I know, right?” Amesho exclaimed.

Felicia and Amesho had apparently become fast friends. Being cast into the crowd of elites had made Felicia nervous, but making a friend with a relatively similar mentality appeared to have loosened her up.

“VRMMOs are just like mobile games, huh?” Amesho added. “With lag and slowdown and stuff... Going through that in virtual reality is no fun!”

“Amesho, do you play mobile games a lot?” Felicia asked.

“Aw, I’ve played ’em for a couple of years... That’s right! Lemme show you something neat.” Amesho assumed the dignity of a top player, showing off one rare item after another that most people wouldn’t see in a normal playthrough.

When Felicia asked how she acquired the rare items, the answer was merely, “Connections!”

In other words, people had given them to her.

With the majority of the dungeon raid party consisting of the taciturn Dual Serpents and the dour Elf Mage Gorgonzola, the two vibrant female players stood out all the more. A few members of Gorgonzola’s group sometimes looked like they wanted to join in on the conversation, but the chemistry between them projected an impenetrable wall of femininity that not even the game’s strongest magic users could surpass.

Matsunaga cast a glance at the girls, then turned his eyes forward again.

Ichiro hadn’t been terribly surprised by Matsunaga’s suggestion that they bring Felicia. He had more or less guessed at what he was planning, and Felicia’s presence — despite being a drag on the party — fit right in with it.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Tsuwabuki?” Matsunaga asked, turning back. He must have felt the other man’s eyes watching him.

“Hmm, let me see if I can guess what you’re thinking.” Ichiro held up an index finger, reciting one of his favorite phrases.

Matsunaga did not hide his scowl. “Please don’t.”

“You’ve been obsessed with the idea of creating ‘myths’ on the internet,” Ichiro continued, with at least enough consideration to keep his voice low so that no one else could hear. “We could call them legends, or folklore, if you prefer... or gossip, in more vulgar terms. Then, one day, you found King Kirihito. I don’t know how you learned about him — and I don’t really care — but you’ve been writing articles about him, trying to craft the legend of *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s ultimate solo player.”

Matsunaga said nothing in response.

Ichiro remained at his side as they walked diffidently down the corridor, and he continued. “Was that your reasoning behind creating the United Guild, as well? Was your insistence on dividing up the Knights to keep them from defeating the Grand Boss? That way, the Knights will lose, or find themselves on the verge of death, only to have King appear and slay the boss... That’s the scenario you’re after.”

He didn’t say it out loud, but Ichiro believed Matsunaga had actually laid even more groundwork. Perhaps he had convinced one of the Knights to throw the fight, which would make it even more dramatic. The Knights’ membership seemed to really enjoy roleplaying; if any of them was less concerned than Stroganoff with the glory of defeating the Grand Boss, they might go along with such a suggestion from Matsunaga.

“Then I, of course, was in your way,” Ichiro added. “Like King, I could easily make it to the bottom floor of the dungeon on my own. If you left me to my own devices, I might have just reached the Grand Boss before King, and defeated it. You couldn’t have that.”

“Impressive,” Matsunaga said, and sounded like he meant it. “You’re exactly right. Really... But now that you’ve figured out that much, there’s no point in hiding it, I suppose.”

“You wanted someone to figure it out, didn’t you?” Ichiro asked.

“Am I that transparent? What a shock.” Matsunaga’s trademark smile appeared on his face. “I’ve been an internet denizen for 20 years. I’ve been running affiliate blogs for about ten of those years. I’ve found that the world of the internet is fertile ground for the creation of myths.”

Matsunaga’s voice was surprisingly calm, without a trace of anger.

“You often see the words ‘God’ and ‘Festival’ thrown around to describe people or events. It’s a sort of mass hysteria — though that may be a quirk of the Japanese user. Internet folklore, to use your word... I’ve always wanted to try to craft such a story for myself. The joy of watching your copypasta reprinted in insomnia threads or watching the views on a video you’ve posted skyrocket... Do you understand that? Maybe not... You seem rather above that kind of thing.”

“A desire for recognition?” Ichiro asked. “I understand the logic behind it, but I’ve never felt it, personally.” His words were tactless, but Matsunaga showed no sign of anger.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki had met “producer” types like Matsunaga before. As the sole heir to the Tsuwabuki Concern, he had had much experience with them. His father had been very lucky that Ichiro had been born a genius with no obstacles in life.

That, of course, had led to patrons, and it was men like Matsunaga, producers, that had helped Ichiro make a name for himself in the business world at such a young age.

Ichiro had enjoyed the treatment at first, but he’d tired of it in time. They had set up expectations for Ichiro, and he had met those expectations easily. In a way, it was a formation of a myth.

Ichiro hadn't been affected by being elevated to the status of myth, but some people might be. Even more so for people already struggling with inferiority complexes.

"Do you know anything about the person behind King?" Ichiro asked.

"I have some idea," Matsunaga responded. "I myself am an outcast in society, so I can tell he's of a similar breed." Matsunaga sped up very slightly to walk ahead of Ichiro, hiding his expression. "Perhaps that's one reason I want to see King declared the strongest."

Felicia more or less knew what Ichiro was thinking.

Just as Sera Kiryu wanted to settle things with Ichiro, Ichiro wanted to settle things with King Kirihito. When she put how Ichiro was acting together with what she knew about him, that was the only conclusion she could come to.

She had talked to Sera Kiryu in the real world just a few hours before. Felicia still didn't fully understand the meaning behind the way her friend had smiled at her, but she did know why Sera wanted to settle things with Ichiro. It was a sort of groping in the dark — a search for any way to find the strength to face the real world. In Ichiro Tsuwabuki, Sera had finally found a barometer for that.

Felicia had witnessed King Kirihito's strength firsthand. Even if it was only in a game, she had to acknowledge the immense skill it took to play that way.

But what if...

What if Ichiro effortlessly beat King Kirihito?

Would Sera just brush it off, or plunge into heartbreak and never recover?

The unwavering cool she had always admired so much in Itchy... she had never hated it as much as she did right now. Could she ask him to go easy on someone, just this once? Even if she did, he probably wouldn't listen to her, and it would make him think of her as a child, too. She decided to make no mention of it.

"What's wrong, Fellie?" Amesho asked.

Felicia had been absorbed in her own thoughts for a while, but as Amesho called her back to attention, she pasted on a smile. "N-Nothing!"

There were a few reasons why Felicia had accepted Matsunaga's offer to join them in the underground expedition. One was that she wanted time to think.

King Kirihito would surely be appearing in the Grand Quest soon — though above or below ground, she couldn't be sure — which meant that it wouldn't be long before Ichiro and King met up again.

She had to figure out what she should do before that happened. She needed time to think about that.

Her other reason was the possibility that events here might help her make up her mind. At the moment, she had no idea where the dice would fall.

About two hours after the beginning of the raid, the group arrived at the final floor.

Moving further in, they came upon an altar room with a stone monument. There was a small group already there, standing in formation around it — either spectators, or challengers trying to complete the event first. Since the party was made up primarily of spellcasters, there was a high chance they were the latter.

"Hey." Ichiro was the first to speak, without any trace of shyness.

The party around the stone monument all turned to him at once and took a few steps back.

"Making progress?" he asked. "If so, we'll take over."

"We'll take over."

"We'll take over."

"Let us take over."

Ichiro heard the string of voices coming from the group of top players behind him. Scary.

Even if the mob spawn rate was bottlenecked, the group had still made it to the bottom of the dungeon with just one party. They must have also been in the top 15% of all players. They weren't that eager to withdraw.

At Matsunaga's signal, the line of Dual Serpent archers in the back readied

their bowguns, with poison-tipped arrows made from Hades Silver.

“Wow, rare arrows!” Amesho cried.

“They’re easily crafted through alchemy, provided you have enough Hades Silver,” Matsunaga spoke, the lightness of his words belying the threat behind them. “They’re ideal for PvP.”

“Itchy, this atmosphere is getting kind of dangerous...” Felicia said nervously.

“I think this is just how conversations go between men of great talent,” Ichiro said. “Of course, it’s all nonsense. What’s the problem, Matsunaga? Set the weapons down.”

“Hmm,” he answered.

With another signal from Matsunaga, the entire ranged squad lowered their weapons. They were like marionettes, all acting in precise unison. If this was also part of their roleplay, it was extremely impressive.

The threat likely wasn’t serious, but Matsunaga’s “joke” had been more to take the wind out of the other party’s sails. They now knew that arguing wouldn’t get them anywhere desirable.

“Um, shouldn’t the first party to arrive have some right to go first?” Felicia asked.

“Yeah, seems like good manners to me,” Amesho agreed.

The early bird got the worm, after all, and respecting the order of arrival was the Japanese way. Anyway, the glory of clearing the quest went to the one who beat the Grand Boss, not the one who activated the event. Felicia couldn’t see what was wrong with letting the first party do it. But Matsunaga just let out a condescending little chuckle.

“Ah, but it’s clear... They’re at a standstill. They don’t know what to do.”

“Matsunaga, the way you laugh is so creepy...” Amesho said.

“Is that a compliment?” Matsunaga turned his serpentine gaze to the advance party, whose members simply shrugged resignedly. It seemed he was right.

All that he had written on his blog and announced on the broadcast was that

spellcasters were needed to activate the event. The setting fluff had suggested that they had to seal away a Devil Zombie created by the Necromancer. It was only natural, then, that some top level players might try to put these things together, gather up some spellcasters, and see if they could trigger the event.

To Felicia, though, this just suggested a fundamental nastiness on the part of Matsunaga's character.

"Well, you probably can't read the stone monument," Matsunaga said. "That requires a high-level investigator class. You need a party that can read the stone to trigger the next event flag. Our team is made up of three parties, and each has members that can read the epigraph, so we have no worries in that regard."

The advance team slumped in disappointment.

"Well, then." Matsunaga began tossing his dagger — his specialty weapon — playfully in the air as he walked up to the stone monument, the dress of his hide coat flapping about him. "If all of our spellcasters use enchantment-type Arts on the stone, it should trigger the event."

"Hmm." Gorgonzola was the first to comply, and the other spellcasters followed his lead to approach the monument.

There was nothing for Felicia to do, so she just lined up beside Ichiro and Amesho to watch the spellcasters form their magic circle.

After quite some time, a flashy light visual began to wreath the monument.

"Ah, the event has triggered," Matsunaga said.

"It took long enough," Gorgonzola intoned.

"Good work." Ichiro plucked a fatigue restorer out of nowhere and handed it to him. It was probably another microtransaction, but Felicia didn't feel like yelling about it anymore.

The fast-spinning disc of light hovering over the monument began to contract. Then, suddenly, it turned an ominous color. The faint pink light took on points of black and red, then became a torrent of eerie darkness which rushed into the monument all at once. A moment later, the monument began to vibrate.

"Gwahahaha!!!" A voice with an exaggerated reverb effect echoed through the

stone chamber.

That escalated quickly, thought Felicia.

“Foolish adventurers, I thank you! Your magic has unleashed the full breadth of my power! The Devil Zombie that was once sealed in Delve will now be unleashed!”

“Wh-Wh-Whaaaaaaaaaaaat?!” Amesho and the lead-off party sounded off in perfect chorus.

Felicia could have sworn she saw someone conducting them.

“Is this the Necromancer that destroyed Delve in the past?” Ichiro asked.

“Likely so,” Gorgonzola nodded.

Oh, yeah, Felicia thought. *That was the backstory.* Since she wasn’t a hardcore Achiever, she wasn’t that familiar with the details of the Grand Story.

“Adventurers. Allow me to grant you a... reward for your assistance,” the Necromancer’s voice continued.

“Not that I mind, but they’re not even hiding the fact that the explanation on the monument and the story contradict each other, are they?” Matsunaga commented.

“The previous Grand Quests were like that, too,” Gorgonzola agreed.

“True enough. Let’s headcanon that the monument was just a ruse by the Necromancer.”

“Yes, your reward is... eternal death! May you sleep forever in my catacombs, your bodies fodder for my ambitions!” the voice cried, the story proceeding bombastically despite the disinterest of the players watching.

As the shaking in the stone monument died down, fissures began to open in the walls around them. Polys mixed with rubble visuals went flying as a foul stench rose up from all corners. The sound the system sent directly to their brains was like resentment itself, shrieking up from the bowels of hell.

Felicia froze up in fear. The terror she had witnessed in the dungeon two days ago reared its head before her once more.

A Zombie Legion.

The advance party and the bowgun squad, both standing against the wall, readied their weapons with accustomed reflexes, as one would expect from top-ranked players. Ichiro stood in front of the frozen Felicia to protect her.

“Well, I’ve come to expect this from the game by now,” Matsunaga said casually. “Sloppy script-writing, isn’t it?”

“But I do enjoy this kind of thing,” Ichiro answered.

“I suppose the Devil Zombie must be reviving up on the surface right around now,” Matsunaga said unconcernedly. Nevertheless, he readied the dagger in his hand. The other players also prepared their weapons in reaction to the monsters that came pouring out. “Well, we’ve accomplished our goal, so we’re free to do as we like. It’s a good thing we have quite a few recovery items.”

“Nonsense,” Ichiro responded as he bought a Monetary Blade from the config menu. “Matsunaga, the Grand Quest is not over yet, and I have not yet achieved my objective. This may be a fine warm-up, but the true challenge still awaits me.”

Ah, I knew it, thought Felicia as she heard Ichiro’s calm words.

She knew why he had intentionally followed Matsunaga’s plan and gone underground. In the end, it was something so simple.

“Not that I haven’t been already,” Ichiro murmured as he readied the Monetary Blade to face the zombie horde, “but I’m going to do what I want.”

Meanwhile, what was transpiring up on the surface could be thought of as the Grand Quest’s “main course.”

The United Guild’s underground team had completed their mission on schedule, causing the Grand Boss to spawn above-ground. It was time for the surface division to rally to face it. The hand-picked participants in this part of the mission — consisting primarily of Red Sunset Knights — charged boldly into battle, soon to seize the glory of triumph over the boss.

Or so it should have been.

Stroganoff fell to a knee, supporting himself with his magic sword. His body

was badly beaten, his HP gauge was down 30%. Squad commanders Gazpacho and Parmigiano had fallen, and Tiramisu was hanging on by a thread. She was known for having the highest defense stats out of all the Knights, but she had been forced to focus on protecting the others, and the strain of it was starting to show plainly in her face.

“Guoooooaaaaah!”

It was an unworldly noise. While it couldn’t possibly be causing the air around them to vibrate, the players felt it throughout their bodies as if it really was a physical force.

It was more than just a feeling, though. This was the monster-exclusive Art, “Terror Howl.” The howl, which seemed to ring out all across the Necrolands, inflicted the merciless debuff “Terror” on all players whose stats were below a certain threshold.

The eyes, blazing red...

The gaping maw, slit from ear to ear...

The dripping skin, glistening eerily from head to toe...

White fur covered its head and ran down its neck and along its back. The skin below was a deep purple, marked here and there with visible, pulsating veins. Its head contained two horns that proudly asserted themselves skyward, but what drew the eye most of all was its four unnaturally enlarged, muscular arms.

“Damnation! What were the devs thinking?” Stroganoff swore hoarsely, and all other players present seemed to be in agreement.

The Grand Boss — the Devil Zombie — was proving more powerful than they could ever have imagined. Each swing of its four arms sent the vanguard of tanker Knights scattering like confetti in the wind. Gazpacho, who had been meant to serve as a shield for the Knights alongside Tiramisu, had been no exception.

“Tiramisu, get back,” Stroganoff ordered. “We need your health back at max before that next four-hit combo. Spellcaster support squad, switch your auto-cast to defense buffs.”

“Y-Yes, sir,” they all said.

If they fell here, after all their boasting, the proud Knights would become a laughingstock. They had to seize victory at any cost.

Although the surface team was made up primarily of Knights, having had part of their core team diverted underground had been a crippling blow. They had been joined by other top players in exchange, but it was hard to coordinate with someone whose playstyle you weren’t familiar with.

Suddenly, Stroganoff heard a scream from Tiramisu, whom he’d sent to the back lines. He turned to see it — a grotesque display of corpses piled one on top of each other. A Zombie Legion, that fighting objet d’arte created by the Necromancer.

Stroganoff cursed again. He had always known that other mobs might spawn in the vicinity the Grand Boss. He had faced cruel stage setups that implied a solo Grand Boss until a sudden rush of mobs assailed the party from behind. But no matter how bad it got, they’d always been able to deal with it.

Until this time...

It was a raid boss so powerful, it could cut through their front lines in seconds, backed up by multiple Zombie Legions and waves of Skeleton Chariots. It was excessive, by any stretch of the imagination. Stroganoff rarely complained about the development team, but even he couldn’t restrain his resentment in this situation.

“You must withdraw, Tiramisu!” The voice that roused the rattled warrior came from the hero rumored to have never logged out since the service began: the High Elf Philosopher, Tomakomai. The delicate features behind thin-rimmed spectacles contorted in disgust as he looked up at the towering Zombie Legions.

“Mr. Tomakomai...” Tiramisu began.

“I have no other choice,” he answered. “It seems I must unleash my hidden power.”

“H-Huh?”

He threw his glasses — the symbol of his intelligence — to the ground, and

charged singlehandedly at a Zombie Legion.

“Screeeeeeee!”

With a screech utterly unbecoming of a Philosopher, he unleashed a flurry of flying kicks. Surprisingly, the damage was enough to cause the Zombie Legion’s enormous body to tremble. But a second Zombie Legion slapped the airborne Tomakomai back to earth.

“Gwaaagh!” Tomakomai’s willowy body struck the ground of the Delve Necrolands. What he had been trying to accomplish no one could say, but the hero who had never logged out since the service had begun now fell silent.

Stroganoff had been able to watch it all go down, but he couldn’t turn to aid Tiramisu. Dealing with the charging Devil Zombie in front of him took everything he had.

Tiramisu valiantly drew her Celestial Sword, and with the determined gaze that had earned her the name “Saint,” she stared down the Zombie Legion.

But, no... It was not possible.

She and the few party members who remained on the back lines were not enough to face down the horde. And if Tiramisu fell, there would be no way left to stave off the Devil Zombie’s attacks.

It’s hopeless, Stroganoff thought. But just as that thought entered his mind, a sudden gust of black wind pierced through her target.

There was no fanfare, just a sudden impact shock, as if the monster had been struck by a thunderbolt from heaven. The intruder dug into his target, tearing through flesh until its HP bar reached zero, then hit the ground like a bullet. The rubble and dust cloud effect kicked up by his landing concealed, for the moment, the shadow’s identity. But then the Zombie Legion he had eviscerated let out a moan, and slowly began to topple.

The dust cleared. A black coat fluttered in the wind.

With unadorned straight blade in hand, a young man with childlike features glared at the large horde of the undead.

“That’s...”

Someone called his name. “King Kirihito!”

“I see King has arrived,” Matsunaga said, opening up an app in his menu window.

Felicia looked up from where she was crouched in the corner.

The battle below ground had been settled with surprising speed. Ichiro, of course, had brought the full force of his abilities to bear, but Amesho had been stronger than expected, as well. Gorgonzola had contributed a great deal, and the party that had arrived before them had also given it their all. Of course, Matsunaga’s dagger and the bowguns of his archer squadron had proved quite useful, as well.

When asked about the secret of her power, Amesho had merely said, “Connections!” One assumed she was referring to the rare items equipped to every part of her body.

Ichiro was unaware of it, but the dagger she carried was part of a class of legendary weapons of which only seven existed in the game, and a bloody PK battle had raged around their acquisition. When asked how she’d gotten it, she’d merely replied, “From a friend,” which had stunned Matsunaga and Gorgonzola beyond the use of words.

“Oh?”

“Let me see...”

Amesho and Ichiro peered over Matsunaga’s shoulder at the application he was using. It appeared to be video capture software that also let the user watch video taken by someone else in the game in real-time. At the center of the screen was King, glaring at a Zombie Legion as it fell in a cloud of dust.

Ichiro looked around for Felicia and saw that she had quietly crept forward to watch the video, as well.

“What effective staging! Though I’m sure he didn’t intend it. He likely meant to arrive on time, but then the event triggered just a little bit early...” Matsunaga said happily, then opened up his text editor.

Perhaps he was already thinking up his next blog article.

“You have my thanks, Mr. Tsuwabuki.” The relief in Matsunaga’s voice was palpable. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but you were very cooperative. Thanks to you, I’ve safely accomplished my goal.”

“Ah, yes. But I haven’t actually accomplished mine yet,” Ichiro pronounced offhandedly.

Matsunaga’s moving fingers stopped. “Mr. Tsuwabuki... Do you...” His manner changed, a menacing glint appearing in his eye. Perhaps recognizing the malice in his voice, the bowgun squadron pointed their weapons at Ichiro.

“I came underground because I thought I might find King here,” Ichiro explained. “It was the first place I met him, after all. We left a bit of business unfinished, you see...”

Ichiro spoke the words with his usual indifference, but Matsunaga easily grasped the intent underlying them.

Ichiro didn’t care what else was going on. He was going to try to settle things with King Kirihito now. It was the exact development that Matsunaga had needed to avoid at all cost.

“Ooo, is this a fight?” Amesho enthused, while Gorgonzola gravely intoned, “It’s not good to fight.” Felicia’s brow remained furrowed.

“Mr. Tsuwabuki, no matter how quickly you go, it will take an hour... no, two hours, to reach the surface,” Matsunaga said. “King and the remaining Knights will have more than enough time to defeat the Grand Boss. I’m afraid you’re out of luck.”

“Nonsense.” Ichiro brushed aside Matsunaga’s attempt to persuade him. “I make my own luck. And Matsunaga, you said it yourself. The entire dungeon is a single map.”

“I did say that. What of it?”

With one hand in his pocket, Ichiro began walking around the stone room. The bowguns tracked his every move.

In a split second, Ichiro removed the hand from his pocket and thrust it at the

ceiling. The magic power that Ichiro had been storing up with “Charge Cast” suddenly burst out of his body. It focused in the space just before his fist, formed into the shape of a dragon, and took flight.

It was the water attribute attack Art, “Dragon Rise Wave.” A strike that mimicked the rising dragon that sang of victory over the mountains of the gods. A torrent of magic energy that could reverse the flow of a waterfall. And combined with Break Object raised to an absurdly high level, it broke a hole in the ceiling of the dungeon. Ichiro had secured a direct escape route.

“Unbelievable.” Gorgonzola stared, dumfounded, while Amesho grinned and squealed.

Matsunaga showed no reaction. Perhaps he had expected this, after all. As a Dragonet, it was natural to assume that Ichiro would have mastered the flight ability that would be needed to use the escape route.

“I see I was right to bring insurance along.” Matsunaga snapped his fingers, and the flagstones in the stone room suddenly flew upwards.

Multiple players wearing horned Noh masks and ninja outfits leaped out and grabbed Felicia from where she stood. Not even Ichiro could react effectively against a surprise attack from an unexpected direction. Felicia neither screamed nor struggled as she was held in place, a small knife pointed at her neck.

“The Dual Serpent Shinobi Corps! So they really do exist!” Gorgonzola exclaimed.

“Matsunaga, that’s a dirty trick, ya know...” Amesho growled.

I thought that might be why he invited Felicia, Ichiro thought. That much was within the realm of his expectations, but what was really surprising was the fact that Felicia was so calm about it.

“Now, far be it for me to invoke a cliché, but... stay right where you are, Mr. Tsuwabuki. It would be very easy to pierce Miss Felicia’s throat.”

“It’s only a game.” Ichiro’s cool demeanor turned a few degrees chillier.

“You’re awfully cold-blooded, aren’t you?” Matsunaga asked.

“As I never bleed, I could not say. That aside, Matsunaga... I believe Felicia

came with us with the full knowledge that something like this would happen.”

The restrained Felicia raised her face at Ichiro’s statement. He could see no fear in her expression.

It was clear enough that Felicia did not want Ichiro to fight King Kirihito. In other words, she was in agreement with Matsunaga — which might have been all the more reason why she had knowingly come along. The possibility that Felicia might go through with this was not part of what Ichiro himself had considered, so it took him aback slightly.

Despite holding Felicia hostage, Matsunaga showed no signs of gloating. He seemed to find it entirely conceivable that Ichiro might just watch her die. With the atmosphere stretched taut around them, it was Felicia who spoke first.

“Itchy.”

“Hm?”

Felicia bowed her head hesitantly for a moment, then asked...

“Itchy, you want to fight Kiryu... right?”

“Well, yes.”

“And you want to beat Kiryu... right?”

“Well, yes.”

What emotions were driving her in that moment? Felicia, as though making up her mind about something, pulled a dagger from her breast pocket. The masked Shinobi that was restraining her hurried to take it away, but she had inputted her action a moment sooner.

“What?!”

“Ah!”

“Wah!”

Sounds of astonishment rang out from all over the room.

One of the stone walls burst in, allowing ingress to a 50-meter-tall Power Golem. There was no point in restraining Felicia at this rate, and the bowgun team with their aim fixed on Ichiro couldn’t help but shift their attention to the golem. In an instant, everything holding Ichiro back was gone, and he had the opening he needed to take flight.

Ichiro didn’t even hesitate.

The Dragon Wings on his back unfurled, and he flew towards the hole in the ceiling. Below him, chaos reigned.

The massive Power Golem’s first act was to protect its master. It reached for the squad of burly Shinobi, sending them flying before they knew what was going

on. Even Matsunaga was struck dumb by the sight as the golem put Felicia on its hand and fired up the rocket boosters on the backs of its legs.

“Itchy!” Felicia shouted. As Ichiro headed for the surface, Felicia’s golem was hot on his heels. “I never actually figured out what to do, and I really don’t want to see you two fight...”

He could barely hear her over the roaring verniers, but he could tell that Felicia was screaming with all her might.

“...but I also wanted you both to do what it is you want to do! So...”

Her golem was specialized for power alone. It lacked speed and stamina. The boosters ran out of fuel almost immediately, and the golem lost its thrust. The massive 50-meter body slowed, floated, and then tilted into freefall. Felicia lost her balance on its hand.

Ichiro grabbed her fragile arm.

“I-Itchy...” she stammered.

Ichiro pulled the stunned Felicia upwards and cradled her in his arms. The Power Golem disappeared in the distance below.

“Thank you, Felicia,” Ichiro said honestly, without changing his expression.

“N-No problem...” she managed.

“That’s all I wanted to say, but I can’t exactly leave you behind now, so why don’t you join me?” he asked.

“Sure...” He could feel her nod awkwardly in his arms.

5 - Noble Son, Rampage

The quick work King Kirihito made of the enormous Zombie Legions drew incredulity from all sides.

Tomakomai was still on the ground, while Tiramisu braced with her sacred sword in hand. Kirihito was too short to cover them physically, but there was no longer any danger to either of them.

The many Skeleton Chariots turned their wheels, focusing their aggro on him, but he set each of them flying with a single Bash. He utilized a unique stance to expand the range of his impact. Pulverized, the bony creatures scattered into particles of light.

“King Kirihito!” Stroganoff, holding down the front line, spat out bitterly. “What are you doing here?”

“Nothing much...” King let the Knight’s hostility roll off his back. “I just came here to meet someone. I’m not here to kill-steal.”

Stroganoff evaluated the situation, skeptical of King Kirihito’s words.

The timing really had been impeccable, and he’d stolen quite a lot of the spotlight. But with the frontline warrior Gazpacho and rear guard Parmigiano out of the fight, and Tiramisu and Tomakomai barely hanging on, Stroganoff couldn’t deny that he was grateful for the help.

The glory of defeating the Grand Boss...

To a man like Stroganoff, who made that his only aim, King was completely unpredictable. Someone with his skill could easily have ridden the timing of his intrusion to deal critical damage to the boss. And as one of the game’s top players, it was hard to believe he had no interest in beating it at all.

As if noticing the unmasked confusion and concern in his eyes, King Kirihito let out a sigh. “Look, it’s fine. If you still think you can beat the boss, go ahead and do it. I’ll watch your backs.”

“What...?” Stroganoff said.

There were still multiple Zombie Legions and dozens of Skeleton Chariots. That was not a line to be said so casually in the face of such a force.

Just what was the man thinking? But the Devil Zombie’s unrelenting attacks gave him no more time to think about it. After somehow managing to resist a heavy yet quick strike with Weapon Guard, he called a potion into one hand and drank it down.

In the continuing chaos, the raid team had lost nearly half of its elite members. Nearly all players on both fronts had sustained serious damage. Realistically speaking, the most efficient strategy would be for them to take care of the surrounding mobs while King turned his attention to slaying the boss.

But...

“I thank you for your aid!” Stroganoff said to King Kirihito, then rallied his fellow players.

There were just under 20 in total. They could take out the Grand Boss with just this many men. They were still the Red Sunset Knights. They were determined.

Tiramisu and Tomakomai provided healing spells and buffs. The frontline players got their preparations together quickly, then charged the Devil Zombie.

“...What are you doing on the front line, Tomakomai?”

“Heh heh... Behold, my hidden power...” The High Elf Philosopher, who at some point had roused himself from the ground, ran side by side with Stroganoff, a half-crazed smile on his lips. Though there was something cold about it, Stroganoff let it wash over him as something he didn’t have time to think about. If Tomakomai wanted to be on the front line, he would let him do it.

He charged, wedging in with “Helm-Splitter” followed by the canceling Art “Switchover” in a swift two-strike combo. He followed it up with “Art Cancel” to ignore the sharp buildup of fatigue and blasted through his cooldown time to ready another attack on the enemy.

“Screeeeee!” Tomakomai’s piercing cry could be heard even by the heavily armored Knights slashing their way up from the back lines.

Beautiful blond hair in disarray and eyes bloodshot, he cut away with blades made of his hands and feet. Perhaps it was due to his Philosopher's stat-buffing, or perhaps it was merely a sign of how high he'd leveled his Grappler's Skills and Arts, but the damage visuals sparked by his hits were easily on par with the DPS spec classes.

As the others unleashed offensive spells and fired off their ranged weapons from behind, Tiramisu added in strikes of her own. It was the Paladin-exclusive weapon attack Art "Punishment." The Grand Boss, being both Demonic and Undead, was especially vulnerable to it.

Its four arms moved. The front-liners all prepared for the hit.

A second later, four attacks in quick succession buffeted them from above. Tiramisu thrust her Celestial Shield forward and dug in. A shockwave exploded over them, followed by a damage visual. Tiramisu gritted her teeth and hung desperately on as her HP drained away.

In the end, she held the front line with 30% of her health bar remaining. Tomakomai immediately dragged her back and healed her with his magic. His eyes were still bloodshot, but he had not yet lost his reason, it seemed; he could still do the least of his duties as a Philosopher.

We can do it. The corner of Stroganoff's mouth twitched as he realized it. *We can hold this cycle.*

All they had to do now was keep an eye on the expiration of buffs to make sure to maintain them properly while the rear guard kept on the watch for ambushes.

But what of King Kirihito? Could he hold off so many enemies at once, all alone?

One glance made it was clear there was nothing to worry about there.

Who was it that had called him the ultimate solo player?

No matter how the game's balance settings might be biased towards the player, in the MMO genre, for one person alone to so easily handle a horde of mobs that gave trouble to even the game's elites...

Even the Skeleton Chariots, clacking their teeth as they charged, were just

building block toys before him. Rather than using Weapon Guard to reduce damage dealt to him, King just kept hitting them with Bashes targeting for the instant just before their moment of impact. He pulverized one Skeleton Chariot after another, then broke into a dash, like a bullet out of a gun. The black whirlwind cut another Zombie Legion to ribbons.

"Amazing..." The words slipped unbidden from Tiramisu's lips. And indeed, it was.

The red-haired giant, himself known as "Monstrous," recalled something Matsunaga had once said to him.

Hey, Stroganoff, no matter where you are, you know it's impossible to remain the strongest, right?

Do you nevertheless believe you can remain the strongest group of players?

Strength was not everlasting. Stroganoff knew that, of course. Even just in this game, as long as leveling up existed, the standard for "strong" would be ever-changing.

Even so, Stroganoff had worked hard to maintain his status. He had scraped together competent players and continued to reign over them as the best among a group of elites. When it came to combat strength and game achievement, he had assembled the strongest team this world had ever seen. This band that he had built could now visualize a path towards victory against a foe of unprecedented strength.

Yet the sight of King Kirihito, mowing down that demonic army all by himself, dealt a blow to Stroganoff's pride. Was it possible that Matsunaga had once felt this way himself? That threat to the perception of one's own strength...

Stroganoff shook his head. They were in a battle right now; he had to focus on that.

Tiramisu, having finished her healing, rejoined the front lines with the rest of the tanks and resumed their fierce attack on the Devil Zombie.

One of the more surprising contributors to the DPS was Tomakomai, who, despite the tragic hit he had taken from the Zombie Legion, had rallied a screech. Frothing at the mouth, he used his hands and feet like whips to strike again and

again. It was rather creepy, but the rate of damage was noteworthy, even among the front-liners.

Of course, he couldn't stand up to Stroganoff in terms of damage of per hit, but again and again he used the Switchover-Art Cancel combo to ignore fatigue buildup, unleashing an uninterrupted chain of attacks. From time to time, Tiramisu had to stop and prepare for a Devil Zombie attack, but the Punishment delivered by her Celestial Sword proved to be the ideal attack to use on the Devil Zombie.

The Red Sunset Knights had cleared the last three Grand Quests. Now, in the face of the anniversary, the moment of their greatest triumph was now in sight. As that realization dawned on them, a cheer began to rise up among the ranks.

Just then...

"What... is that?" one of the Knights murmured as he looked at the sky.

A point of light appeared, visible through the sand and miasma that clouded the air above. It must have been flying quite high. Its point of origin was far in the distance, coming from the direction of the dungeon and flying straight for them.

There were not many ways that players could fly in this game. Mages had "Levitation" and "Flight," and Dragonets and Machinas had Dragon Wings and "Vernier Units" respectively. But as it was hard for a player to maintain their balance while flying in three dimensions, many players just didn't bother.

What was the point of light, then? A player, a mob, or a visual signifying another event?

Some of the players used their Far Sight skill to check the identity of the point of light. One by one, other onlookers turned to face it, straining their Perception stats to the limit in vain. No matter how much they zoomed in, it was simply too distant — but it was bridging that distance now at tremendous speed.

"What's that?"

"A bird?"

"A plane?"

“No...”

Wreathed in a flashy visual, the point of light crashed into the middle of the main thoroughfare amidst the mobs that King Kirihito was currently engaged with.

The force of the landing produced a shockwave. It apparently also dealt physical damage, reducing the Skeleton Chariots in the vicinity to a powder that merged with the rubble and sand kicked up by the impact. From the epicenter, they heard a high-pitched scream that sounded like a girl’s voice.

The dust cloud plumed outward, carrying the shockwave with it. It sent a Zombie Legion flying — its own mass a lethal weapon — back towards the Devil Zombie.

And the damage that came with it...

A devastating blow.

Two damage visuals lit up. The Devil Zombie and Zombie Legion spewed out gobs of flesh as they both vanished into points of light.

An inappropriately cheerful victory fanfare rang out, proclaiming the defeat of the Grand Boss and the end of the Grand Quest.

What in the hell just happened? Stroganoff’s mind refused to accept it. The enormous Devil Zombie was now gone without a trace, leaving an ostentatious wealth of drop items on the ground where it once had been.

Was it... over?

All of it?

He didn’t have the presence of mind to feel despair, emptiness, or even shock. The calm part of his brain told him that he was simply numb with surprise.

“Hey, it’s me,” said a brightly smiling young man standing at the origin of the blast.

The suit jacket and slacks that he was wearing did not suit — to put it mildly — the enormous dragon wings that extended out from his back. The other players stood there in disbelief as understanding slowly dawned on them. This was the man who had fallen from the sky and sent the Zombie Legion flying. In his arms

was the crumpled silhouette of a girl.

“T-Tsuwabuki...” The word squeaked out of Stroganoff’s throat.

King Kirihito slapped a hand to his forehead. “Old man... Y’know, I was working really hard not to step on any toes...”

“Oh? Have I done something inexcusable? Ah... It appears I have. Sorry, Stroganoff,” Ichiro said lightly as he noticed first the remains of the Devil Zombie scattered across the ground, then the ranks of gaping Knights.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki had been on the dungeon raid team. What was he doing here? Now? It hadn’t even been an hour since the Devil Zombie had first appeared. Of course, it had been tacitly understood that the members of the underground raid team could join the above-ground battle if they could make it, but... what on Earth was this? How had he made it here from the deepest level of the dungeon so quickly?

But Stroganoff quickly realized it was pointless to wonder. However he did it, the fact was that Ichiro Tsuwabuki had triggered the underground event and made it back up to the surface. That was all that mattered. And the girl he was holding in his arms was the girl named Felicia who had gone with him into the dungeon before.

“Hey there, Kiry... hito,” she said.

Despite everything, Felicia at least seemed conscious enough to hold up one hand and wave to King, and the brazenly aloof young male avatar could say nothing in response but, “H-Hi.”

“Tsuwabuki... What did you come here for?” Stroganoff demanded.

Ichiro waved off Stroganoff’s question, turning neither his body nor his face towards the man. His interest lay solely with the one player he had come in to see. “It wasn’t to steal your prey from you. I have no interest in such trivial things.”

Trivial?

Trivial?

Stroganoff and the others had put their pride on the line to face this threat,

and this man had called it “trivial”! If he didn’t care about it, then what was it he had flown all this way for?

Ichiro’s cool gaze met that of King Kirihito. Their interest was mutual.

A new murmur rose up from the crowd, this one different from the previous.

“Isn’t he... you know.... the one Matsunaga blogged about...”

“The one who handled a dungeon solo...”

“Is he gonna fight King?”

“No way...”

But did he even care about those whispers? In that moment, to Ichiro Tsuwabuki, surely nothing else in the world had any meaning.

Nothing but the man who stood before him.

It was a difficult mindset for the average person to grasp. No sooner did the thought pass through his mind than Stroganoff realized that he was lumping himself in with the average person. Even that terrible Grand Boss and the glories to be earned from defeating it — to those two, it had held no more value than a pebble on the side of the road. It had been completely meaningless.

What was it, then, that had value?

That was simple: the knowledge that they were strong.

Stroganoff had thought he understood that concept before, but these two were on a different level.

He remembered those words Matsunaga had once said to him... and what had come next.

Hey, Stroganoff. The people’s perception of strength is absolute.

You can’t fight the hierarchy once it’s set. It’s decisive.

But in the end, it’s a fool’s game, because the question of who is strongest can be overturned at the slightest whim.

The only way to win is to take yourself out of the running.

That was the truth. But did those two agree? Those two, glaring at each other, showed no sign of belief in that commonsense principle. They both believed without a shadow of doubt that they were the strongest, and it was likely that all

the onlookers believed the same thing. And after the display of potency that they had just shown, there could be no doubt that these were the strongest players in this game.

But the two of them could not be satisfied with that. Being judged “strongest” by others meant nothing to them. The only standard that had absolute meaning was their own belief that they were strong.

For both of them, no matter how others around might praise them, there was another man whose strength was comparable. The question in their mind — “which of us is stronger?” — could not be dismissed. The mere existence of that question was anathema to them. It was the height of hubris.

But this battle would put an end to all of that. It would establish their hierarchy. It would be decisive. One of them would stop being “the strongest.” If they did not challenge each other, if they did not fight, then both could remain the strongest.

That was something that Stroganoff couldn’t understand, but that lack of understanding itself was part of the reason he felt so outmatched.

The Dragonet Magi-Fencer and the Human Fighter — each readied their weapon and glared at the other. Each of them had drawn what seemed like the obvious conclusion in their mind.

But in the end, one of those two conclusions was false.

“Um...” King Kirihito — Sera Kiryu — scratched his head. He hadn’t been expecting to run into Asuha Tsuwabuki here. Rather than feeling awkward or embarrassed, he mostly felt bewildered.

“Tsuwabuki...” King Kirihito began.

“You don’t want me,” Asuha said. Asuha Tsuwabuki... Felicia... seemed unsteady on her feet — perhaps she had taken damage to her inner ears — and she found herself speaking frankly to Sera-Kirihito. “I’m not the one you should be saying hello to right now, Kiryu.”

She pointed to the Dragonet boy, who raised one hand, as if waiting to be introduced.

Yes, of course...

King Kirihito fixed his eyes on the laid-back man standing in front of him and simply nodded. He wanted to finish things, too.

“Hey, old man,” King Kirihito greeted him, with a bit of a bashful grin.

“Hey, King,” Ichiro responded, with his usual cool smile.

Those were the only words they exchanged. But with that alone, each seemed to understand everything, and they took their stances. King Kirihito with his trusty straight blade, Ichiro with his bare fists.

While the outsiders remained bewildered, the understanding between the two was complete.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki, Asuha’s second cousin. He was an incredible person in real life... someone to whom Sera could not compare.

But here the game, Sera was his equal. If King Kirihito could push Ichiro Tsuwabuki aside, Sera’s superiority would be confirmed. And then that strength would become Sera’s own.

Loss was unacceptable.

King Kirihito tightened his grip on his beloved sword.

Sera had never once come into a fight with the slightest thought as to the possibility of losing — at least, when it came to a video game. Sera had always been called a natural talent, an eternal victor... and had always believed it wholeheartedly. The man standing before Sera now was, for the first time, shaking the very foundations of that belief.

This wasn’t about winning. It was about not losing. And it was the first time King Kirihito had ever felt that way.

“Oh, yeah,” King said, as if suddenly remembering something.

The atmosphere, so thick you could cut it with a knife, was instead cut through by King’s voice. He opened his item inventory from the menu window and selected several items. It produced several bottles about ten centimeters long, which he threw over to Ichiro.

Fatigue restorers.

“Paying you back for the ones I used in the dungeon,” King said.

“Ah, you didn’t need to pay me back...” Still, in the interest of politeness, Ichiro stashed them in his inventory.

“I don’t care what you think, old man,” King shot back. “I’m paying you back because I want to.”

“I see,” Ichiro said.

In the world of the game, victory was the sole determiner of righteousness. For that righteousness to mean anything, the conditions had to be fair. They were the words of the person who had taught Sera Kiryu how to play.

“Hey, old man.” King Kirihito voiced the one question he wanted to ask before crossing swords with this man.

“Yes?”

“Has Tsuwabuki told you about my real-life situation?” King demanded.

“Yes.”

So he knew. King experienced a momentary wave of awkwardness.

No matter how strong Sera was in the game, Ichiro was by far the superior in real life. That was something Sera would have preferred to keep locked away...

But those thoughts were all dissipated by Ichiro’s next words.

“Shall we finish this?”

In that moment, Sera Kiryu knew.

Right now, to this man, my real-world circumstances mean nothing. There will be neither mercy nor contempt nor ridicule from him. All there will be is admiration... for the strength of King Kirihito.

In that moment, Sera Kiryu disappeared inside of King Kirihito; it would not be inaccurate to say that they had merged into one. Sera was wielding King Kirihito’s strength as naturally as could be. And that made one other thing certain...

I can win.

It’s not that I want to win. It’s not that I don’t want to lose.

I can win.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” King said.

A gust of wind blew by, carrying with it visuals of swirling sand and miasma. They could not simply glare at each other forever; the pressure balance between them would break with the drop of a pin.

The actual catalyst was the sound of Felicia getting out of the way. The moment they both realized she was just far enough away not to get drawn into it... that was the signal to start the battle.

The two of them suddenly launched across the field, as if propelled by springs.

Definitely a strong opponent, Ichiro thought.

Kirihito unleashed Bash attacks with a wide variety of speeds, impact times, and waits on cooldown time. He combined stances and derivative actions so skillfully that the one Art used over and over again came off as complicated swordplay.

If Ichiro tried to counter with Strash, the winner would simply be the one whose command landed first... and by a matter of milliseconds.

The various tricks one could use in the real world to shave down that timing were impossible in this inflexible system, making this less of a duel with swords, and more of a game of high-level rock-paper-scissors.

Ichiro clenched his open hand into a fist and decisively executed a Weapon Guard with his bare hands. Even with the bonuses granted by Dragon Claw, he was not yet strong enough to fully block a hit from King’s sword. But he couldn’t afford to take the direct hit, either.

While blocking the sword, he executed a Strash with his open hand.

There was a flash. But King’s instincts were perfect when it came to timing the moment a hit would land. He flew away in that instant, escaping the attack. Space opened up between the two of them once more.

Ichiro wouldn’t be able to land a hit that easily.

He would have to change his strategy.

King was trying to maintain an ideal distance, so it was clear he wouldn’t charge in right away. That gave Ichiro time to open and manipulate his menu window. He went from config to the microtransactions screen and selected the icon he’d tapped enough times before to leave fingerprints on it.

He took the Monetary Blade Arondight in his hand. Having fought with him in the dungeon once before, King Kirihito likely knew how he would use it. The onlookers didn’t, and began whispering among themselves at the sight of it. An interesting but irrelevant reaction, as far as Ichiro was concerned.

“That kinda thing’s in bad taste, old man,” Kirihito called.

“Nonsense!” Ichiro responded.

For the umpteenth time, a bit of light banter transitioned directly into another wild clash. Ichiro hefted the Monetary Blade and activated Breaker, but Kirihito countered with Bash once more.

Weapon Guard would have been a safer strategy, but his choice showed he was focused on remaining on the offense — he wedged himself in the very instant before the hit landed and cut off Breaker’s activation.

The Monetary Blade Arondight didn’t break, thanks to its high Durability, but the damage went through Ichiro’s arm and appeared as a number above his head.

Yet Arondight did not break, and King’s cooldown time, short as it was, gave him an opening. Ichiro twisted his body and performed Spiral Blaze.

At this close range, Kirihito’s response did not come in time.

The swirl of hellfire hit the moment it was fired. If one couldn’t dodge in time, there was no choice but to take the direct damage. And so, King Kirihito took it.

A noise of awe rose up from the crowd.

Finally, a first hit.

This was quite a grueling battle. Ichiro had never thought the day would come

when he'd have to put such analysis into a situation. He found the corners of his mouth turning upward.

The game was a fictional environment. It had nothing at all in common with reality; it was a mere illusion conjured up by the signals beamed to the brain. A tiny world that existed only within servers and databases.

But... so what? Every person Ichiro had met in this fictional world had been stimulating. And the most stimulating of them all was now before him, holding a sword.

Even if everything around him was all just a string of ones and zeroes, there was a real human on the other end creating it and manipulating it, and that person was currently fighting on his level. That was one thing he couldn't call nonsense.

Had he ever burned for victory this way? Whatever it took for him to win here, Ichiro Tsuwabuki would seize it, without hesitation.

"What're you smiling about, old man?" Kirihito asked.

"The same thing you are, I think!" Ichiro called back.

The knowledge that he was the strongest, the coolest. He had never once lacked it. Having someone to challenge that belief with all their power felt... No, even trying to put it into words was nonsense. It cheapened the feeling.

In the fight up until now, Ichiro had been formulating a hypothesis. Kirihito's prowess came from his consistent reflexes, and if Ichiro could find a way to bridge that gap between them, he could crush him.

He didn't have the time to test that theory, though — he would just need to judge the right moment and put it into action.

This time, he didn't ready his weapon. He prepared to launch into a magic battle.

"Ah, there they go..." Felicia murmured.

"You sound disappointed," said the leader of The Kirihitters, Kirihito (Leader), who had appeared beside her at some point.

"Yeah... I didn't want them to do this, because one of them has to lose..."

“I see. You’re an IRL friend of King, aren’t you, Miss Felicia?” Kirihito (Leader) nodded knowingly as he remembered what had happened in the dungeon the other day. “It can be quite awkward to run into an IRL acquaintance in-game. In an earlier MMO I played, I once hit on a female player who turned out to be my mother...”

“Leader, no one wants to hear that story. Really,” another Kirihito said.

“G-Good point.”

The level-headed Kirihito’s advice spared Felicia from listening to any more of Kirihito (Leader)’s tragic tale.

Kirihito (Leader) wasn’t the only one who had arrived to watch the fight between Ichiro and King. A large crowd had begun to form, including the Knights who had been defeated in the prior battle, respawning sans their lost equipment.

“Tsuwabuki’s quite something. He even landed a hit on King...”

“But the odds are still about 60-40 in King’s favor...”

“How’s he gonna come back from this? Let’s watch!”

“You think he’ll get even better during this battle?”

The educated-sounding remarks came from the Knights, led by Stroganoff, who watched with folded arms. They had fully embraced their role as spectators, and seemed to enjoy the roleplay of commentating, though they didn’t actually offer up even a bit of useful analysis.

They simply said things like, “Ah, that’s...” and, “Yes, of course...” and, “Impressive as always,” now and then, while the others nodded along as if they understood.

Perhaps the air of dignity exuded by these powerful characters was gift enough to the watching audience.

Whenever they were asked about which player was at a disadvantage, the answer was always, “Tsuwabuki. Tsuwabuki.” In the pool that was going on behind them, the odds were slightly in King Kirihito’s favor, as well.

Yes, King was fighting well. With bated breath, Felicia watched the scene

unfold.

King Kirihito dodged between Ichiro's magic blasts to unleash a Bash attack. Ichiro didn't draw his weapon, but executed a bare-handed Weapon Guard instantly. After the damage calculation was finished, a three-digit number popped up over his head, and his health gauge went down again.

But Ichiro didn't have a moment's peace before a second and third Bash assailed him. King's trusty sword offered a high bonus to his ATK, and the direct damage it dealt was considerable.

Ichiro quit using Weapon Guard as a defense and began to focus on dodging the relentless strikes. While dodging, he opened his inventory and equipped his Monetary Blade once more, intending to turn the tables.

Felicia didn't know this, but Ichiro was planning to strike the instant after the hit from Bash completed. In other words, stealing King Kirihito's trick.

As Kirihito turned over his sword and executed a fourth Bash, Ichiro instantly unleashed his Breaker. The slice gouged deep into King's side.

That was a second hit.

The effect of the Dragonet-exclusive skill "Blowback" sent King Kirihito tumbling along the ground.

Felicia gasped.

Kirihito (Leader) looked at her sidelong and sighed. "Miss Felicia, I believe there is nothing to worry about."

"Um... because King will win?"

"No."

The other six Kirihitos nodded in agreement with their leader.

"You're worried that King will lose and lose all his confidence, aren't you?" Kirihito (Leader) asked.

"Yeah..."

It was true. Felicia knew the weakness behind King's facade. She knew his fight

with Ichiro here was just a way for Sera to become stronger. If King lost this badly in a public place, her friend might never recover again. This would be Sera's last battlefield.

Why, then, did Kirihito (Leader) insist that there was nothing to worry about?

"Well, look at them, Miss Felicia. Both King and Mr. Tsuwabuki are enjoying themselves."

“Tsk...” King Kirihito got up again quickly. He readied his weapon again and was beginning to approach guardedly when Ichiro spoke up.

“Right.” Ichiro readied his fists again. “I’ve decided on what I’m going to do. What about you, King?”

“Don’t ask me,” King said with a smile.

Ichiro dashed along the ground again, but the move he executed with his Monetary Blade was neither Breaker nor Strash. He focused power in his open hand, and unleashed the fire-based attack spell, Sword of Surt.

This hellfire sword, wielded by the guardian of the Kingdom of Flame, went far beyond low-level or even mid-level magic. Its flames could roast a horde of undead monsters in a single blast. Even its graphic visual far outstripped other high-level spells in terms of flashiness.

And with that, his objective was clear.

The impressive fire spell that Ichiro had unleashed was not intended to deal damage at all. It was just to distract him. The flashy visual diverted a lot of power from the image processor. Of course, if such a thing were enough to cripple him, he wouldn’t have the reputation he did... but it would be a way to slow his reaction time.

Then, a beat later... the Breaker came!

Kirihito tore through the flame graphic and countered yet again with Bash!

The hits landed simultaneously. The numbers canceled each other out, leaving some numbness in each of their arms. In the brief time it took Ichiro to land, he opened up config and called up another Monetary Blade.

“You’ve still got more?” Kirihito groaned.

“I have as many as I need,” Ichiro replied smoothly.

Then they rushed at each other for another clash.

Blasts of air, streaks of light, roars of sound. Shattering fire, dancing lightning. And wherever the two shockwaves collided, no objects would be permitted existence. It was an extraordinary sight. It seemed unreal...

Of course, it wasn't real. That was a fact. But would any of those standing there, watching those two avatars locked in joyous combat, really agree? The spectacle was nothing but an illusion, a mirage created by lines of code. This was a truth that most people would readily acknowledge. But deep down in their hearts, would they really agree?

The two greatest players on the Asgard Continent were colliding. Everyone was watching with bated breath.

One, the Human Fighter, Kirihito.

The other, the Dragonet Magi-Fencer, Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

The battle had been raging for quite some time now. Each had chipped the other's life bar down to nearly nothing, and the fatigue mounting on both sides was starting to confer negative modifiers and slightly laggy motion patterns on each. Even so, neither's confidence had dimmed.

King Kirihito's strike sent Ichiro's Monetary Blade flying, but the audience gasped as Ichiro opened up the menu screen and, with smooth motions, called forth yet another. As always, he bought as easily as he breathed; perhaps the gasps were really ones of envy.

"Pretty bourgeois..." said Kirihito. If there was any player who could speak honestly what was on his mind, it was him.

That was what Ichiro had thought when the boy had politely explained the reason why he used only Bash. That was why the Dragonet man had so quickly lashed out with the flashy visual of Sword of Surt as a smokescreen. The image processor of the Cocoon that Ichiro was using could easily process that effect.

It was things like these that made rich people so disagreeable.

"Nonsense," Ichiro said. "It is true that I have a bit more money than you, but do you have a problem with that?"

Kirihito raised an eyebrow in response. "Nah, not really."

"I thought not."

This had been their understanding from the start.

Ichiro's power came from the money he had earned through his own talents,

poured into the game.

King Kirihito's came from his player's inborn talent and lengthy time investment.

Each had, in their own way, earned the game's form of "strength," and though the means differed, they had come to the same end. The only difference was the way that they invested their talents. Each was applying his own ability in his own way to compete to become the strongest on the Asgard Continent.

Ichiro selected "Config" from his open menu window, switched to the microtransactions menu with a practiced motion, and bought a number of items whose price would make the average person swoon.

The sudden influx of new items caused consumables to overflow from his inventory and crash to the ground. Potions bottles bumped into each other, but neither cracked nor broke apart. The items piled high, creating a clinking mountain of glass. The sight left even King Kirihito dumbstruck.

"Hey, old man, ain't you gonna use those potions? You shouldn't waste 'em."

"Nonsense. I decide what's waste and what's not. This mountain of potions is not wasted... Not if I use them to beat you."

Felicia couldn't hide her groan at watching Ichiro's shameless wastefulness. "This is disgusting, isn't it?"

"It is," Kirihito (Leader) agreed, nodding.

It was an expensive investment for a cheap provocation. As they watched, they could see the potions continue to pile up behind Ichiro, higher and higher. It was a sight to make an Alchemist — the class that spent day in and day out creating potions — go mad.

"I believe Mr. Tsuwabuki must have considerable respect for King," Kirihito (Leader) murmured with an expert's air. "After all is said and done, he is his polar opposite. Still, summoning all those potions there... what on earth is he thinking?"

But, Felicia thought, *he's right.*

Sera Kiryu had been dealt a meager hand in life, yet was fighting to the utmost

with that limited selection of cards. By comparison, Ichiro Tsuwabuki had been dealt a large hand, and could fight while holding many other cards in reserve — a quality that, ironically, meant that he could never hope to imitate Sera's way of doing things. Maybe he really did respect her friend, and this was just a sign of that.

But it was still disgusting.

The atmosphere among all those assembled — both the fighters and the spectators — was stretched taut. Kirihito adjusted his grip on his sword and held it at eye level, glaring at Ichiro.

Stroganoff whispered as he gazed at the two, "Looks like they finally intend to finish it."

It seemed plausible. Their HP and fatigue bars were nearing their limit. As they'd continued trading blows and slinging mud at each other, the result had become less certain. A single hit might finish it on either side.

Ichiro seemed to be thinking the same thing. He charged up magic power in one hand, and held his Monetary Blade in a reverse grip in the other.

Were they simply going to hit each other with all the power they had?

Given the way King Kirihito had constantly blocked the Monetary Blade Breaker, that would put Ichiro at a slight disadvantage. But the young heir's smile did not fade.

An audible gulp rang out among all assembled.

A moment later, something tore through the air.

Kirihito had been the first to charge forward. His speed was incredible. Ichiro was late out of the gate.

Just as the crowd realized he had manipulated something in his inventory, items began dropping around him, one after another. In addition to the contents of the microtransaction packs he'd been buying, Monetary Swords came raining down from the sky. Ichiro then released the magic he had been charging up into the ground. There was a visual of flying rubble.

Kirihito's movements visibly slowed.

But it wasn’t just Kirihito’s. Nearly everything in the area had slowed down. It was likely that very few of the players assembled knew for sure what was going on. But Felicia thought back on what Amesho had said back in the dungeon...

“VRMMOs are just like mobile games, huh? With lag and slowdown and stuff... Going through that in virtuality is no fun!”

Slowdown.

Yes, this was slowdown.

Having a large number of items pop up, combined with the rendering of the flashy rubble and sand effect, required significant graphics processing that was inflating the data bus and burdening the server. It wasn’t enough to completely lock up the game, but it was more than enough to produce lag.

And what effect would the explosion and the flying rubble and sand have on each warrior’s ability to fight?

Ichiro could see King flying through the sand, the point of his sword slashing through the air, cutting down all in its path.

The moment his opponent had produced all those items, Kirihito had known what he was planning. He’d been more or less expecting something like this. His opponent had seen what he could do, and it was likely that he might see his weakness and how to exploit it. But the way in which he’d done it was utterly outrageous.

Ichiro had dumped all the items to overtax Kirihito’s image processor. There were already a ridiculous number of potions on the field, and more kept coming. Any further graphical burden or inflation of the data bus would produce unavoidable lag.

As sacrilegious as the strategy was, King couldn’t be annoyed — a good thing, as excess emotion would just increase the data bus. He would navigate his way through the bps and FLOPS, as though threading a needle.

Clutching the hilt of his straight blade, King took a step forward from his swiftest stance. In the same instant, Ichiro hit the ground with his magic blast.

Sand and rubble went flying. The showy explosion visual ate up the last of his

remaining memory at once. The time it took for the system to send electric signals to the brain was fatally slowed. The frame rate of the scenery around him became choppy, and it became hard to precisely perceive his opponent.

The lag made his opponent appear to move in slow motion, but he knew that wasn't really the case. The battle was continuing in real time, and since the environment was rendering perfectly on Ichiro's side, it was probably King whose actions were being easily anticipated.

In other words, when he perceived Ichiro readying his sword for a Breaker after completing the spell Arts, that had probably happened a few milliseconds ago.

Even if he trusted in his quantum connection and tried to send image data, timing the Bash to hit his target just before impact detection would be close to impossible. All he could do was predict his opponent's attack path based on his previous habits and send an image of dodging in that instant.

The image processor slowdown was still going. The question of when to evade was basically gambling.

But Kirihito took the bet. He imagined moving his immobile body. In his slowed-down time, he imagined dodging his opponent's strike, then using Bash to break his opponent's Monetary Blade.

Then suddenly, the world around him sped up, making up for the slowdown time as it caught up to the present. Electronic signals flooded into Kirihito's brain.

A cloud of sand and a flash of light. Piercing through it was Ichiro, his new Monetary Blade in hand, unleashing another Breaker.

The slash scraped his cheek. The scenario Kirihito had imagined now played out in flesh.

Ichiro's eyes narrowed.

Bash! The rising strike broke Ichiro's sword and send it flying back. The timing of his experiences were catching up with reality. The broken tip went flying off into the sand cloud. Kirihito took a two-handed grip on his sword once more.

He had gambled... and won! Now, a counter with two Bashes in a row. A single overhead blow would—

But as he put his imagination into motion...

“...hrk!”

...Ichiro abruptly pivoted and thrust a fist straight at him.

It was a high-level Dragon Claw, the Dragonet bare fist converted into a lethal weapon. The hand reached his throat and then stopped short.

It was millimeters away. Ichiro could stab his windpipe and take off his remaining HP before Kirihito could even try to unleash another Bash. The dust cloud that had whipped up around them settled, revealing the tableau of the two of them, standing there as still as statues.

“Does this mean I lost?” Kirihito said before the eyes of all the onlookers who couldn’t quite tell what had just happened.

“Yes, you lost, and I won,” Ichiro said.

Why hadn’t he simply finished him off? It could have been compassion, drama, or perhaps simply a whim... but his other items aside, King was grateful he wouldn’t have to lose his weapon or armor.

With his usual cool expression, Ichiro withdrew his fist and began placing the items on the ground into his inventory.

I lost, huh?

Kirihito watched Ichiro from behind, quietly letting out the breath he had been holding. The loss brought with it no sense of humiliation or shame. The measures his opponent used had been rather cheap, but somehow, he didn’t find that it cheapened his loss. Next time, he would just have to train so that he could find a route to victory, even during slowdown.

Was this what was known as the exhilaration of loss? He’d never thought of himself as the sporting type...

The moods among the crowd ran the gamut.

The players who had lost a lot of money in the pool were grousing and ripping

up their tickets in anger. It was hard to feel pity for them, though, and King didn't feel sorry at all. The players who had bet on Ichiro were taking their winnings, looking quite pleased with themselves.

One girl was standing in the crowd, looking at King Kirihito. He turned towards the meddlesome girl and raised a hand to her in greeting. It was as if he was saying, silently, "Hey, I'm okay."

"I was expecting that to be easier, though," Ichiro murmured.

"Then you underestimated me, old man." Kirihito shot back. But then, he'd still lost, so he couldn't sound too high-and-mighty.

"Well, when shall we have the next round?" Ichiro asked.

"Hmm?" King asked.

Having finished recovering his items, Ichiro threw a large number of potions at King, one hand still in his pocket. King, having lost most of his HP, accepted the potions gladly.

"Don't you want to schedule a rematch?" Ichiro asked.

"Oh, that?"

Was he already thinking about that? The old man certainly worked fast...

"I do want revenge, but I don't know about agreeing to something like that. Why don't we just see how we both feel the next time we meet?" Kirihito asked. That was how he really felt.

Ichiro just nodded in understanding, and didn't say any more on the subject.

With an empty potion bottle in hand, Kirihito looked up at the sky. It had been a long time since he'd admitted to losing. For so long, the game had been nothing but a tool to help him face the real world. The feeling of not wanting to lose again spurred him on to true strength. That motive hadn't changed, he was sure.

He had assumed that defeat would just be a pathetic end, but for some reason, he didn't feel that way now. It was indeed frustrating, and he wanted to pound the Dragonet into the ground the next chance he had... but there was none of that emotion, like black smoky flame, that Kirihito had previously felt

towards “the enemy.”

Perhaps it was a sign of maturation.

The miasma had lifted, and the sky above the Necrolands was clear and blue.

6 - Epilogue

Just to stand in front of the school gate took considerable courage. Sera stood there, fists clenched, with just enough courage to make it there and, surprisingly, much less trembling than expected.

Sera, King Kirihito, had been unquestionably the strongest player in all of *NaroFan*, a strength earned through the relentless hunting of monsters. Sera had never felt any doubt about this being the proper course of action. It had all been in the interest of becoming stronger.

Everybody loses sometimes.

Those were the words of the person who had taught Sera about how gaming worked, and learning that one loss wasn't the end of the world was somehow a relief in itself.

To someone like Sera, who had learned a bit earlier than other children how cruel reality could be, how spiteful people could be... that person had offered a way to escape. To that person, Sera felt gratitude and — despite the embarrassment of showing it outwardly — no small amount of filial piety. Of course, that person suffered from severe virtual sickness, and so had not been able to accompany Sera into *NaroFan*. As a result, in a very real way, that world had belonged to Kirihito alone.

If you can fight alone and lose, and still not feel pathetic, then maybe it's time to stand and face reality. That was what Sera's self-styled master had said.

The only thing left to do was to try it.

"Yoo-hoo, Kiryu!"

Sera turned to face the cheerful voice. "Tsuwabuki."

"Wow, I still can't get used to the sight of you in a uniform!" Asuha cried.

"Hey, knock it off..." Sera squirmed as Asuha tugged on her friend's uniform sleeve, grinning.

“Hey Kiryu, are you mad Itchy beat you that way?” Asuha asked as Sera smoothed out the wrinkles she had made.

“Well, from the first time I saw him in the dungeon, I realized he was that kind of person...”

The lag attack had been unexpected, but it was a time-honored old MMO PvP technique, according to Sera’s master. Back in the days when everyone’s connection had been slow, MMO players whose houses happened to be closest to a relay station would get deep into PKing, apparently.

If you whined over losing to a technique like that, it was just a sign that you needed more training.

Sera clenched a fist. *Next time, I will win. Next time, I won’t lose. I will pound Asuha’s “big brother” into the ground.*

“Kiryu, you...” Asuha gazed at her friend’s profile, murmuring. “You look like you’re really interested in Itchy now.”

“Oh, you could tell?”

“No, I just said it to tease you.”

“...Hey!”

“So you finished it off with a lag attack, huh?” Sakurako asked.

It was several days later. Sakurako had been disappointed when she’d heard the details.

“No, I just finally invoked my full power,” Ichiro said.

“You call that your full power? Spending tons of money, overloading the server to cause lag and beat your opponent... you can’t really want that to be your ‘full power’!”

“Nonsense. Money is a reflection of my genius, so using a lot of it is using my full power,” he said calmly.

As the two talked around each other, they were sorting out their Bon Festival gifts.

Ichiro didn't need them, of course, but politicians and company presidents sent them to him as a formality. Ever since he had sent out a memo requesting non-perishable items, he had received many fine jellies, juices, and occasionally wines. They would take at least six months to go bad, and by that time, he'd be receiving New Year's gifts. It ensured that the Tsuwabuki estate never lacked for such things.

Of course, dealing with Bon gifts was part of Sakurako's job as a servant, but Ichiro had decided on a whim to help her. It was that kind of day.

"What if the way you chose to beat Sera has just twisted her even more?" Sakurako demanded. "Making her decide she needed to buy microtransactions to get stronger... Sending her into the dark side of microtransactions..."

Ichiro looked unbothered. "I don't think King is that kind of person, personally... Oh, this gift is from Matsunaga."

"Oh?"

Ichiro murmured as he checked the name on the latest gift. Sakurako turned back and peered at it. Indeed, it was an address she didn't recognize, but the sender line contained the phrase "Leader of the Dual Serpents," which seemed to remove all doubt.

"It would be easy enough for him to find out my identity, and I don't exactly keep my residence a secret... A polite man, isn't he?"

"Hisahide Matsunaga," she said. "Is that his real name?"

"I don't know. I wonder if it's a tea kettle... Oh, it's a ham."

"If it were a tea kettle, I'd have to look out to make sure it didn't explode," she said.

It wasn't a very expensive present, but pleasant enough. The accompanying letter thanked him for the chaos he had caused the other day. It didn't sound like it was sarcastic.

The truth was, ever since Ichiro's duel with King, Matsunaga's blog had exploded with hits as Matsunaga had written articles casting Ichiro as a villain. Ichiro had anticipated something like that, so he didn't mind. Perhaps that was

part of what he was thanking him for.

“Even so...” Sakurako put the ham received from Matsunaga in the fridge and returned. “After you finally got into *NaroFan*, I thought we might be able to play together... but we’ve barely played together at all.”

“We hung out for the first week when I was leveling up. Afterward, I had Asuha’s request to attend to.”

“Hmm,” she said. “I kind of miss it. I don’t suppose we could keep playing *NaroFan* together?”

“No need to worry. I’m going to keep playing *NaroFan*,” Ichiro assured her.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki had truly enjoyed his time playing *Narrow Fantasy Online*. He had never known a more stimulating ten days in his entire life. He had encountered so many things he had never before imagined, and there were surely more things yet to be enjoyed.

But he had spent the past few days completely immersed in that fictional world, and he was beginning to feel a bit under-exercised. After spending the day working up a sweat in his indoor pool and indoor gym, he’d made up his mind.

“Iris will be back next week,” he added.

“Oh, that’s right. Iris’s tests will be over!” Sakurako’s expression lit up. “Iris Brand will open its doors once more! Shall we invite Felicia, as well?”

“That’s up to Felicia... ah, it’s from my uncle in Nagoya,” Ichiro murmured as he took up a new box.

“Oh?!” Sakurako lit up far more than she had for Matsunaga’s present. “From Asuha’s family?”

“Yes, there was a letter with it. Asuha is so polite, too, isn’t she? If she just wanted to catch up after all that, she could have just sent an e-mail.” As he spoke, he felt Sakurako’s gaze urging him on, so he opened the letter.

It was written in a big, looping, feminine hand. Asuha’s letter began with an apology to Ichiro (and also Sakurako) for asking them to indulge her selfishness. Sakurako looked a bit depressed over being treated as an add-on. But then, Asuha partly perceived Sakurako as a rival, so perhaps it was inevitable.

Then the letter talked about Sera Kiryu.

According to Asuha, Sera had brightened up considerably from before. Asuha often went to Sera's house to hang out now, and despite the latter still refusing to come to school, they often played games together. The plan at the moment was for Sera to attend school the day of the term's closing ceremony, then start coming seriously during second term.

"Sera's going to declare war on the bullies, it says," Ichiro finished.

"That's very extreme," Sakurako commented. "The closing ceremony is today, isn't it?"

Reading the letter, Ichiro realized for the first time that Sera was trying to become stronger. Sera had thought that acquiring the power of King Kirihito, the strongest player in the game, would be enough to face real life again. Not even Sera was sure if that had happened or not, but according to Asuha, her friend was grateful for the chance to fight with Ichiro. Also, she said, the rematch was still on the table.

Ichiro was thrilled by the prospect.

He turned over the letter to find a picture on the back. It was apparently Asuha and Sera, standing there in their uniforms. The person who must have been Sera was facing the camera with a rather awkward smile. Very different from King Kirihito's cocky indifference.

"Ichiro-sama, that picture... is that Sera Kiryu?!" Sakurako burst out.

"I suppose," he said.

"So... is it a boy... or a girl?!"

Why is Sakurako so obsessed with that question? Ichiro wondered with slight bewilderment. And then he replied:

"Nonsense."

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It's a pleasure to meet you.

I'm Blitz/Kiba, your crummy writer. First off, thanks a lot for reading my book. The register is that way.

I believe some of you know this, but this novel, *Paying to Win in a VRMMO*, is a rewrite of a story I originally wrote for the fiction website, *Shosetsuka ni Narou* (I Want to Be a Novelist). This is my literary debut. It's the realization of a long-standing dream, so I don't know what to do with my life now.

Kane no Chikara (Paying to Win; I'll use the nickname it's called on the internet) was serialized beginning in July, and I'm here writing this afterword at the end of January, which means that the work I began writing six months ago will soon be on store shelves.

Looking back on it, it's been a very eventful six months. I had discussions with Hobby Japan, received plot ideas, did revisions, and called to ask for deadline extensions... all kinds of professional stuff. But sitting here writing the afterword gives me the greatest realization of all that something I wrote is about to appear in stores.

"Here are the people I want to thank" and "I'm running out of space" must be the two things every wannabe dreams of writing.

Now, the novel version of the story is fun in a different way from the web version. Of course, the characters themselves are pretty much the same.

Those who liked this story online, I urge you to have a look at the other version. This version is the complete one.

For those who have already read the web version, and think, "Hey, that person isn't here!" don't worry. You'll see them soon enough. Maybe they'll appear in the next volume? I avoided having that character interact with Asuha in the web version, so you can look forward to that now.

Now, there are two points I want to touch on with regard to the novel version.

First, Rein Kuwashima's illustrations! They're magnificent. Truly beautiful. They captured the young heir's coolness, Asuha's liveliness, Sakurako-san's buoyancy, and Kirihito's... well, I won't comment on Kirihito because I might get in trouble, but it's as if the images were wrung out directly from my brain. I'm really glad I got this artist!

Now, the other point! It's about Sera Kiryu, a.k.a. King Kirihito! I avoided declaring Sera's gender in the web version, too, but refusing to determine the gender for the novel made it impossible to do an illustration of the character. But... okay. It's not just that I didn't want to decide, okay? I really racked my brain over which one would be better. But... okay. I ended up deciding, "I like both!"

That's why there's a postcard in this book. I want you to write in the comment column whether you'd rather Sera be a boy or a girl. You guys get to decide if Sera is a loli or a shota. I'll send out a letter of thanks to three readers from the side I select.

Now, I'm running out of space, so here are the people I want to thank.

Hey, I said it!

Um, to my editor who contacted me at the beginning of September, Mr. K (what a hottie!). Sorry for that weird aside, but I really do think you're hot, both inside and out. I made a lot of trouble for you, but I'm grateful for everything you've done for me.

And Rein Kuwashima! Thank you for being such a wonderful character designer. And thank you for reading the web version, too. I'm going to write more and more so you can see more of Kuwashima's brilliant illustrations.

Also, also! Readers of the web version! I wish I could put all of your web handles on here, but I'll restrain myself! The reason my editor Mr. K (what a hottie!) discovered *Kane no Chikara* was because of your enthusiasm for it. Thank you!

Also...

The one who, in summer, thought up the idea that the one who helped King level up might be his mother...

That’s right, you!

I didn’t use that suggestion, but thinking about that helped me to expand on King’s character. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that that was where the plot of the published version came from. You never know what might happen in the world! Thank you!

To all my editors and proofreaders and publishers, thank you all for the trouble you went through.

And thank *you*! You! Yes, you, reading the afterword! You right there! This is a cliché, isn’t it? But it’s how I feel! Thanks! I’m going to keep working and put out more and more books! Cheer for me, okay? Later!

Please hold off on opinions and thoughts... just send fan letters to...

151-0053 2-15-8 Yoyogi, Shibuya Ward, Tokyo Hobby Japan, Inc. HJ Bunko Editorial Department Blitz/Kiba and Rein Kuwashima

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Paying to Win in a VRMMO: Volume 1

by Blitz Kiva

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Emily Sorensen

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